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OLD DOUBLE FIST; or, The Strange Guide.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "CROOKED CALE," "THE BOY PARDS," "DEADLY DASH," "PANTHER PAUL," ETC., ETC.



TEARING HIMSELF FREE FROM BRYAN'S GRASP, HE SPRUNG TO HIS FEET, ONLY TO GO DOWN BEFORE ANDERSON'S IRON FIST.

Old Double Fist;

OR,
THE STRANGE GUIDE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE BLACK RIDER," "THE BAR-
RANCA WOLF," "CROOKED CALE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DISGUSTED SET.

DARK night had settled over the valley. Gradually the shadows blended together, until they became one. The bushes and shrubs, the stunted trees and gray boulders grew indistinct, as the crimson glow of the setting sun slowly crept up the mountain-side, and it was night below even while the peaks of the Mogollon Range gleamed brightly with the yellow rays.

Then a light shot up in the valley—clearer and brighter, seemingly less hazy. The dark figures that moved to and fro around this light, pronounced it a camp-fire.

A camp-fire it was, in truth. And those dark human forms were those of white men—of diamond-seekers!

It is with this party that we have mainly to do, and hence a brief introduction is necessary. After, the different parties will speak for themselves.

Gathered around the camp-fire are five men; one other member is slowly gliding to and fro at some few yards' distance from his comrades. Now and then he glances impatiently toward the camp-fire, where the quintette devour rather than eat their evening meal. Then he starts, crouching low down as he bends his ear in painful listening, with thumb on hammer, forefinger touching the trigger of his short rifle.

Of the quintette, one is old, one is perhaps thirty years of age; the other three are young—as is also the guard—ranging between twenty and twenty-five.

The eldest—he in the suit of greasy, stained and time-worn buckskin—is the guide, Mathew Anderson, or, as he is better known, "Two-Handed Mat," and "Double Fist," the sobriquet arising from his *ambidexterity*. That is, he had two "right hands." Years before, when he was in his prime—during the "gold-fever" of California—this name was won by his deeds in a "free fight" when he cut a bloody swath through the rioters with his two knives. Dubbed thus by an enthusiastic eye-witness, the sobriquet clung to Anderson, and as such he became known from "St. Louey to Frisco."

Gray as a rat, Mat holds his own remarkably well, and is a customer that few would care to encounter in a grapple for life. Of medial height, he is broad-shouldered, deep-chested, long-armed and round-waisted, with legs and feet that a ten-mile racer would have eyed with envy.

The next in age, James Cook, tall and symmetrical, is the taciturn member of the party. His dark, handsome features, rarely, if ever wear a smile, and his comrades hardly understand him. There seems to be a secret in his life. Either he has committed a dark and heinous crime, remorse for which now tears his heart-strings, or in the days gone by he has met with some great loss. Such is the whispered verdict of "the boys."

Of the other four, little can be said, since they had exhibited no peculiar traits, save that of courage. That was proved by their presence here, in the heart of the Apache country.

Harry Gilmore and Sam Bryan were cousins, from Kansas. Ed Dane was from the land of Hoosierdom. Paul Jayne hailed from Virginia.

These, then, are the "Diamond-Seekers."

Hastily dispatching their evening meal, the camp-fire was carefully covered up, and then withdrawing to one side, where a leafy couch had been spread close beside a huge boulder, the comrades lighted their pipes, so grateful after the day's toil and disappointment.

"Wal," grunted Double Fist, puffing furiously, "you fellers satisfied yit?"

"Satisfied!" echoed Dane, the loquacious. "Satisfied—when we haven't found even the smell of a diamond?"

"Jest what I mean—you've hit it edactly. We've bin here close onto a month, now, an' what better air we for't? As you say, we hain't got a smell. I don't say it's all a sell, mind ye, but I do say this. All the diamonds they is here you mought put in a hummin' bird's quill an'

blow 'em in a skeeter's eye 'thout makin' him wink once't. That's the way I lays my dust."

Double Fist had visited the "Bella Union" at Frisco, during the reign of Joe Murphy. Hence his poetic simile.

"But diamonds *have* been found here," ventured Gilmore.

"They say so—in the papers. It must be true, for, as everybody knows, they never lie. But now look here, Harry. You're a edicated man. I'll give you a little 'rithmetic. Ef we six fellers, 'th two good eyes apiece, hain't found a diamond in four weeks, how many kin we find in a year?"

"But we may find one to-morrow that will richly repay us all for our work."

"Ef—that's the biggest little word I know on."

"I begin to think with you, Anderson," interposed Cook, "that our chances are slim of finding any diamonds. But, for all that, I believe that we can pay ourselves for our time and labor before leaving this valley."

These words, quietly spoken, roused even those who, wearied with their hard day's work, were falling asleep. They knew that Cook would not speak so positively without good grounds for his belief.

"I'll tell you what I mean. Anderson, you have been in California. Were you a digger there?"

"For a bit—but soon got over the fever. It's a dog's life," grunted Mat disgustedly.

"Then I wonder that you have not noticed it before. To-day I passed by several places that, if this was California, would be pockets of gold. One spot I noticed in particular. Only that it was then near sunset, I would have investigated the matter. Perhaps you may, some of you, have noticed what seems the dried-up bed of an old water-course, running close by the hill-foot to the southwest. If, below the surface of that bed, you can find a whitish pipe-clay, I'll guarantee your finding gold with it," quietly added Cook.

"Let's look there the first thing in the morning," cried Dane.

"It can't do no harm, as I see. We're just as likely to find diamonds thar as elsewhar, I reckon," and Mat laughed shortly.

"Don't let the matter keep you from sleeping, boys," laughed Cook, as he rolled himself tightly in his blanket.

The night passed in quietness and comfort to all save the sentinel, the night being divided into three watches. Though as yet nothing had been seen of the dreaded Apaches, none could tell how long this apparent security would last.

The nearly full moon sunk behind the mountains in the early part of Paul Jayne's watch, he being the third. The valley became intensely dark, despite the stars that studded the vast canopy of heaven.

Memories of the dead past thronged fast upon his mind, and leaning against the gray rock, Paul forgot the duties intrusted to him. Mechanically he filled his pipe, and then struck a match upon his sleeve.

The bright glow lighted up his face as Paul ignited the fragrant tobacco. Only for a fleeting moment, but long enough to do its work.

The air seemed agitated, and a faint, peculiar hissing sound caught the young man's ear. Then followed a sharp click, and some splinters fell from the rock above him.

Roused as if from a dream, Jayne started and crouched down, rapidly cocking his rifle. He was fully awake now, but half-believed 'hat the alarm was only the offspring of his imagination.

This is why he did not at once give the alarm and rouse his slumbering comrades. For several minutes he bearkened intently, scarce breathing, but not a sound met his ears save the faint breathing of his friends, and the dull moaning of the morning breeze as it swept down the rocky valley.

"Bah! 'twas only imagination," muttered Paul, lowering the hammer of his rifle, and once more rising erect. "The rock is frost-eaten—a bit tumbled down and struck me."

But with daylight came a discovery. The quick eyes of Mat Anderson were the first to notice a slender bit of wood that lay several yards from the base of the rock.

The manner of the guide was peculiar to himself. For a full minute he sat motionless as a statue, only his eyes at work.

Every foot of ground visible from his position was rapidly but thoroughly scanned. Then he arose and glided round the huge boulder. Not a trace of human life rewarded his scrutiny. The valley seemed uninhabited save by his own party.

Mat returned and picked up the bit of wood that had so perturbed him. His brows knitted and an uneasy glitter filled his eyes.

"What is it, Double Fist—what have you there?" suddenly called out Gilmore, his attention arrested.

"A Injun arrer—Apash, at that!"

"What?"

"You kin see. It's here—but whar did it come from, an' when?"

The long, feathered shaft was curiously examined. The polished hickory was white and unsoiled, the feathers that had once formed part of a wild turkey's plumage, were stiff and unbent. The sinews that strengthened the notch, were bright and unfrayed. "All was perfect save the head. That had been formed of black flint, but now only a portion remained attached to the shaft. The least experienced of the party could not doubt the freshness of this fracture. No dew had dampened it.

Paul Jayne suddenly recalled the event of his guard, and instinctively glanced toward the boulder. It was easy to define the exact position he had occupied; a slight depression something similar to that made by one's lying at full length upon a partially frozen snowdrift.

Not more than a foot above where his head had reached, Jayne noticed an abrasion of the frost-eaten surface. Springing forward he closely scrutinized the spot. Then he knew that his alarm of the preceding night had not been without foundation. Tiny splinters of black flint still adhered to the rock.

"That settles it, then?" he exclaimed.

"Settles what?"

"That arrow was shot at me, while on watch last night. I heard it hit, but as nothing followed, I concluded it was only fancy."

"I don't understand it," muttered Mat, in a perplexed tone. "Ef a red-skin fired the arrow—an' it kem from the quiver o' an Apash—he must 'a' seen you. An' ef he was close enough to see you, dark as it was, then he didn't ought to miss ye *thet* wide. I don't understand it—thar's somethin' nasty in it."

"May it not have been shot as a warning to leave, or as a declaration of war?" suggested Ed Dane.

"Not much—Apash don't do business that way, *they* don't. But jest you stan' still. Mebbe I kin find out somethin' more."

Mat closely scrutinized the face of the boulder. He saw at a glance that the arrow had been discharged point-blank at the rock, else it would have glanced to one side or the other. Instead it had rebounded. That fact told him in which direction to look for further information.

And yet the solution of the mystery lay at his feet—literally so, in fact. Had he thought of looking among the loose shale at the boulder's base, the truth would have been plain.

With head bent low, Anderson glided in a direct line from the boulder, toward the middle of the valley. Then he paused abruptly and knelt down, at a point not two-score yards distant.

A long, low whistle of surprise called forward his comrades, and then they two bent down at the edge of a small patch of smooth sand. Near its center were several footprints, clearly defined, especially two of them, as though the maker had stood still for some seconds.

The toes were pointed toward the boulder. Beyond all doubt they had been made by the one who discharged the arrow.

"Paul—your foot is the smallest. Step here in the aidge, so's not to disturb them others."

Jayne did as requested. This proved incontrovertibly that none of their party had made the tracks.

"It can't be the track of an Indian," observed Dane.

"How d' you know?" sharply retorted Mat.

"Why—you see the toes are turned out, and Indians always walk pigeon-toed," added Ed, who had read many a "border-romance" in his day.

"Oufh! you got that from some o' your story books, I bet a boss."

"But isn't it true?"

"Gen'ally speakin', mebbe thar's somethin' in it; but 'twon't do to bet on al'ays. A buck Injun gen'ally toes in, or else walks straight for'ard, pervided he don't drink too much rot-gut. One o' them kind, even when he's sober, 'll toe out, for it kind o' steadies him, like."

"Then you think—"

"No, I don't, nuther—I know. Look at that track. No buck Injun ever wore sech a foot as thet. See how it arches in the middle—a buck 'd make a flat print, like a Car'liny nigger. It'd be longer an' twicet as broad. The toes would

be spread out flat an' n'arly o' the same len'th. Thar's why I say a squaw made the track. Do the Apash squaws git drunk? Not of'en; the bucks don't give 'em no chance," and Mat paused to gain breath.

"You don't mean that is a white woman?"

"No, I ain't sech a fool. Whar'd a white woman come from here? an' whar'd she be doin' 'th Apash arrows? No, it's a squaw. I'll tell you why. You fellers go by the books you read—that's why you're sech blessed greenies. I go by what I've seen an' studied out for myself. Now lis'en.

"Did you ever see a white woman as was pigeon-toed, unless she was deformed? No—I guess not. They all toe out. They can't help it; it's nature. You take an' stan' a woman up straight, then see 'f her knees don't tetch each other. They will, every time. Must, the way she's built. Then 'f your knees tetch, kin you toe in? 'F you think so, try it. You've got to toe out. Thar it is, then. A woman is a woman no matter what color her skin may be. So's a Injun squaw. You kin find some as walks like the bucks, but it's shore to be a old an' worn-out one. An' when they git that-a-way, thar foot is like a buck's, too."

"But, if a squaw, what is she doing here, and why did she shoot at me?"

"Did she shoot at ye? Look—'tain't more'n forty yards from here thar. Think anybody who could shoot hard enough to make sech a hole in the rock as that is goin' to miss the bigness o' a man o' your size, 'f they meant business? More like she jest meant to skeer you."

"But why? I don't understand."

"Why is it that thar's places whar you kin squat on the ground an' put a hand in one spring that'll scald you, then t'other in another whar you'll freeze? Kin you onderstand that?"

"Come—we are losing time here very foolishly, I think," impatiently interposed Cook.

"What kin we do? Kin you foller sech a trail through these rocks an' over this gravel? I can't."

"You say this is a squaw—then of course she must have friends near. Of course she will tell them where we are, even if they do not know already."

"They don't—or we'd 'a' got more'n that one arer—an' planted whar we'd 'a' found 'em out a good deal quicker, too," dryly added Mat.

"Come—speak out, man," impatiently cried the Californian. "What do you intend doing? To stand here until those devils come?"

"Sca'cely. We've got to travel—but the day's afore us. They won't do nothin' afore night."

An animated discussion now took place. The young men, brave in their ignorance, protested against fleeing from an unseen foe. Even Cook spoke in favor of remaining, at least for a time, though he, next to Double Fist, realized their peril.

"I don't care about leaving until after we see if there is anything in what I told you last night. I firmly believe that we are within reach of a vast amount of gold, easy to obtain, that will pay us well for the risk, when we set out, and I don't like to run away empty-handed at the first sign of stormy weather."

"Suit yourselves—I only spoke for your good. I reckon I kin stand it ef you fellers kin. But 'f you're goin' to try diggin' thar, we must git to work. The trouble 'll open to-night, 'f at all. Fust, reckon we'd better grub," quietly remarked Anderson.

Scant time was wasted in our friends dispatching their breakfast, and an hour later found them at the edge of the dried-up water-course alluded to by Cook. During the walk nothing had been seen of human beings other than their own party, and now all but Anderson seemed to forget their probable danger in the reflection that perhaps untold riches lay at their very feet.

"It is here that we will find it, if at all," muttered Cook, his face pale and stern set, his eyes glowing with a strange fire.

The spot he had selected for the test, proved his experience as a gold-hunter. If the valley contained any gold, this, as he said, would be the most likely place.

They stood in what had once been the bed of a goodly-sized stream. The round, smooth-worn boulders plainly evidenced that. The bed ran close to the foot of the hills, naturally following their conformation.

The point selected by Cook was where the bed made an abrupt bend, thrown aside by a rocky spur. At this bend there had been a strong eddy. The ridge of heavy, rounded pebbles thrown up proved that. And beneath this ridge

the gold, slowly washed downward by the mighty flowing stream, must have settled.

All this Cook pointed out to his comrades. He dwelt upon his theory at some length, as though anxious to delay the moment that must decide the truth, or rather make it known.

Hope and fear struggled with each other. On the faces of all it was written, even that of Double Fist. Their emotions were something akin to that with which a gambler watches the deliberate turning of the card that is to decide his fate. It is such moments as these that try a man.

With an effort Cook struck his light pick into the ridge. The spell broken, each man fell to work with an energy that was almost appalling. The pebbles and gravel were cast aside in a constant shower. Only one thought—one idea—filled their minds. At that moment they would have fallen an easy prey to the Apaches, had they been at hand. That thought was forgotten.

The gold fever was scorching their veins.

"Stop!" suddenly cried Cook, rising erect, when the ridge had been lowered several feet below the level of the bed. "We are low enough now. If I am right, the next foot in depth is all we want. Some of you fetch water. Fill all the pans."

Panting and breathless, more from excitement and suspense than fatigue, he sunk upon the heap of fresh earth, and gazed into the excavation. They had dug below the sand, reaching a brownish clay. Thus far his hopes had been fully realized. And one more blow of the pick or shovel would have told him the truth—whether this was like the gold mines of California, or not. But he could not deal that blow then. He must compose himself first. His heart throbbed too violently.

And yet greed for wealth had not brought this man here. For years he had never known a want that gold could gratify. He was one of the few who had torn an immense fortune from the heart of the Golden Land. For years he had scarcely spent the interest of his fortune.

Instead, he was trying to flee from the dread past—from memory. He did not fear death, because to die would be oblivion.

But he, too, was a victim to the yellow demon, for the time.

Carefully Cook scraped away the brown clay and cast it aside. He knew that it was too porous to contain gold—that the heavy metal would sink through it much as a handful of shot will work its way to the bottom of a keg of powder.

Then he paused again. The glow deepened in his eyes. His cheeks flushed hotly, then faded to a sickly pallor.

Below the grayish brown clay, lay revealed a thin stratum of almost black clay; two inches below this, as a stroke with his knife showed Cook, was a white clay, hard and solid. Through this gold could not sink. If any, it must be contained in the two inches of dark clay.

Cook did not stir until his comrades returned, bearing water. Carefully the black dirt was scraped up, and then the washing was begun in breathless silence.

Little by little the clay dissolved and the thickened water was poured away, then more dirt and more water were added. The actions of these men may be described—but not their looks, their thoughts!

In those busy minutes they felt like the prisoner as he beholds the jury about to deliver the verdict that shall give him life, or doom him to a shameful death. The suspense was terrible.

At last it was over. Slowly and carefully Cook poured the water from the pan. Then he lowered it to the ground and sunk back like one fainting.

A low cry burst from the lips of those haggard men, a cry that is frightful in its intensity.

Over an ounce of dull yellow flakes and beans lay in the bottom of the pan.

It was gold!

Perhaps it was fortunate that an interruption occurred just at that juncture; an interruption that instantly recalled their senses, and broke the terrible spell that this discovery cast upon them.

A sharp, whistling sound—precisely similar to that which had startled Paul Jayne but a few hours before—followed by a light thud, caught their ears. The latter sound directed their eyes.

In the fresh mound of gravel, but a few paces behind them, quivered the feathered tip of an arrow, buried two-thirds its length in the dirt. Instinctively, the men sprung forward and crouched down close to the rocks, clutching their rifles in readiness for defense.

The direction in which the feathered shaft pointed, told them that the arrow had been sped from the hillside above. But as no other missiles followed the first, the truth flashed upon Mat's mind, and darting forth he clutched the arrow.

A cry broke from his lips as he noticed something wound round the shaft, secured with a bit of sinew. He tore it loose, and saw that the inner side bore traces of writing. Then his eyes flashed up to the mountain-side.

"What is it?" cried Cook, springing forward.

"Don't know—for shore. A female critter, I think. She jest dodged round the pint yender," excitedly muttered Double Fist.

Cook seized the square of fawn skin; it was tanned soft and white. Rude letters, in what seemed to be blood, covered the inside; letters that were printed, not written.

"Strangers," it began, "your lives are in danger. Flee while you can. An hour's delay may be fatal. A band of Apaches have discovered you, and intend attacking you this night. I risk my life to warn you."

Thus read James Cook the contents of this strange missive. In silence his comrades listened. At the last word, their eyes met; then turned toward the pan with its mite of yellow dust.

Could they abandon the treasure they had just found, after so long a search? That was the thought each pair of eyes revealed.

CHAPTER II.

TWO BRAVE WOMEN.

"FOSTER, have you discovered any thing?"

"Nothing, though it gives me a view for miles and miles around, I could detect no sign of human life," gloomily responded the gray-headed man.

Perhaps never before had that wild and lonely valley held such occupants as now. There were three human beings, one man, two women.

Not far from the rocky side of the valley stood a light, white-tilted wagon. Lazily cropping the rich grass that bordered the tiny stream, were two stout mules, both "side-hopped"—straps connecting the fore and hind foot upon the same side.

The women were young, the eldest could not have been much, if any beyond her "teens." What, then, were they doing here? A few words will explain.

John Temple was what might be termed a "rolling stone." Almost every occupation in life he had tried, only to abandon it in favor of a later fancy. Twenty years before he had married a woman who had waited for him since girlhood. Then, left alone in the world, she gave the hand that had so long been withheld by her parents in the hope that he would overtake the fortune he so erratically pursued.

During the time of his wedded life, John Temple was little altered. He moved nearly every year, scarcely waiting to get settled in one location before he sought another. Thus by degrees, he worked his way into Colorado, and there he buried his wife, who left him only two daughters, Mary and Minnie.

For a year this shock—for he had loved his wife with a constancy that in all else was wanting—strangled his roving impulses, and it seemed that at last the wanderer had found a home. But the hopes of his children were quickly crushed.

Who has forgotten the marvelous tale so lately carried from world to world by the winged messengers of the Press—the account of diamonds and other precious stones being found in great profusion amid the mountains and foothills of Arizona?

This was the glittering bubble that lured John Temple from his cosy home that nestled in the shadow of Pike's Peak. He forgot the pledge he had given his dead wife, but his children had not forgotten theirs.

They knew how vain would be the attempt to dissuade him, and so, though sadly and sick at heart, they prepared to accompany him in his search after the phantom riches.

Though foolhardy and reckless at times, John Temple knew better than to attempt the journey alone. He joined a small caravan, partly of friends, partly of strangers, and turned his face toward what was fondly believed to be the new Dorado.

As the goal was neared, the diamond-seekers grew more and more eager and impatient of delay. And, when within view of the distant peaks, the axle of the light wagon driven by Temple broke down, he was left alone to repair

the damage, and then to overtake the party by traveling a little later than usual.

This gave him little anxiety, as a spare axle was strapped beneath the wagon-bed, and an hour's work would fit it in place. So he saw the party pass on without a thought of uneasiness.

Yet the hand of fate was in the accident. The cruel jolt that had snapped the axletree was the first link in the chain that was to end in sorrow and death.

Unloading the wagon, Temple removed the bed, having loosed his mules to feed upon the grass, while Mary and Minnie kindled a fire to prepare the mid-day meal. By the time it was ready the new axle was fitted into place.

Far away, just crossing a swell in the ground, they could see the tilted wagons of their late companions. With their light rig it would be easy to overtake them; so believed John Temple.

But fate was against him. As he started to catch the usually docile mules, the nearest flung out his heels spitefully, and, though barely reaching Temple, hurled him to the ground severely bruised. Then the brute, joined by its mate, galloped away over the sand-hills.

Though momentarily stunned, Temple was not seriously hurt, and started in chase. Aided by his daughters he finally succeeded, but when once more they took up their journey, the sun was far down in the west. The caravan had full four hours the start.

Angry, rather than anxious, John Temple lashed the mules to a trot, and kept them at good speed until long after the sun had set. Though it was now dark, he, in his ignorance of prairie lore, never once doubted his ability to keep forward in a straight course. Or, even should he stray a trifle to one side, what did that matter? The glowing light of his friends' camp-fire would easily lead him back. So he reasoned.

He saw that a storm was brewing; one that promised to be of unusual severity, and he lashed his animals on, anxious only to join the camp before the storm burst.

But the expected beacon light did not dawn for them, though hour after hour they rumbled on, and then the storm-cloud burst, the cold rain chilling them to the bone. Sullenly Temple unhitched and staked out his mules. Then, huddled together for warmth, the trio passed that long, miserable night in sleepless discomfort.

Day dawned bright and clear, but though they were upon rising ground, nothing could be seen of their friends. And yet Temple felt confident that he had kept a straight course, for direct before them loomed the dark range.

For two days more they pressed on, hoping against hope, but never finding a trace of the caravan. Still, they believed it would be all right when once they gained the mountains. Sooner or later they must meet with the lost ones.

After dark the foot-hills were reached, and in the little valley where we now find them, the father and children encamped. With the first light of day Temple sought the high ground and anxiously scanned the surrounding country, but the longed-for sight did not greet his eyes.

"But they must be near, father," added Mary, the eldest, though in a troubled tone.

"I think so. We may have passed them in the night, as they may have grown anxious for our safety and encamped to wait for us. We must surely see them some time during the day."

"But will they come here—to this valley?" queried Minnie.

"Possibly—but not likely. However, it will be easy to find them. Only—"

"Only what, father?"

"I meant if there was any one to keep a watch for them. We don't know what danger may be hidden in these hills, and I don't like to leave you here alone."

"But you must—and then we are able to take care of ourselves for that length of time, surely," laughed Mary. "You forget our rifles, and that you taught us how to use them."

"That is like you, darling," and John Temple lovingly touched the sunny cheek of his black-haired child. "Really I don't know as there'll be any danger, for I shall not go far away. Only up on the mountain yonder, where I will have a long view. I must see them from there. You are sure you're not afraid, child?"

"No—are we, Minnie?"

"Not much, if you don't stay long," murmured the golden-haired girl.

"Well, then, I will go. There is no time to

lose, for if they once get in among the hills, it may be hard to find them. Keep close to the wagon, and have your rifles at hand. I don't think there are any red-skins near, or we would have heard from them last night. Still, there may be wolves, or such like. Don't fret, now; I'll be back in an hour," and kissing his children, John Temple strode rapidly away.

The girls stood together watching him until he had disappeared from view. And a right comely picture they formed, too.

Mary, the eldest by some two years, was scarcely twenty years of age. She was tall, her figure fully developed and beautifully—almost voluptuously—rounded. Her hair was jetty black, heavy and straight, yet silken and lustrous, worn in a simple coil at the back of her head. Her complexion, though clear, was of that peculiar Oriental richness that words can scarcely describe. This, with her hair, and great black eyes, she had inherited from her father.

No one could deny her beauty; she was beautiful, almost peerlessly so.

Minnie was shorter, lighter—in a word, *petite*. As Mary resembled her father, so Minnie resembled her mother. To say that her complexion was fair, of "the blended lily and rose," that her hair was a beautiful nut-brown, with a pure golden glitter as the sun's rays glistened athwart it, as it hung slightly curling adown her shoulders, unconfined save by a simple ribbon band; that her eyes were large, lustrous, of a deep, melting blue, at times half-concealed by the long, slightly-curved lashes; that her bosom was full and swelling, her waist round and compact—in a word, that her form was symmetry in every detail, is an apology for description; but sometimes one meets a face or figure—rarely both combined, as in this case—that only the eye can describe.

If Mary Temple was beautiful, Minnie, her sister, was lovely.

The sisters seated themselves upon the green-sward, beside the wagons, and with true housewifely instinct, busied themselves with mending such rents as the long and rough journey had made in their stout calico dresses. But their gaze frequently wandered away over the valley and upon the mountain-side, as though ill at ease.

And that they should be, is but natural, for they knew that the ground upon which they sit is a portion of that still claimed by the wild Apache nation. And where could that people find a more solitary or wild retreat than among these hills—almost mountains?

An hour—two hours passed by; and yet John Temple had not returned. Though neither spoke of it, the sisters were growing anxious, and they read the fact in each other's faces.

Mary arose, and lifting the front curtain, handed forth two rifles, together with their equipage. And in the manner with which the weapons were handled, both sisters betrayed a familiarity that is seldom met with in women, where fire-arms are concerned.

"What are you going to do, Mary?" queried Minnie, as she took the light weapon from her sister, and closely inspected its cap.

"Nothing—only you know father told us to have them in readiness. I can do no harm, and then there is something in the air that distresses me. I don't know why, but I believe there is danger impending. I feel a presentiment of evil—ever since last night it has been upon my mind," hurriedly spoke the girl, her cheeks glowing, her eyes filled with a strange light.

"It is this strange place, Mary—so lonely, so different from our dear, cozy home. If father had never left it!" and Minnie sighed.

"I dreamt of mother, last night, sister. I know it was a dream, and yet it seemed more like a vision. She came to me, I thought, looking so sad and mournful. Then I saw she was weeping. She motioned us to turn back—for it seemed that father and you and I were riding over a prairie. Father and you looked steadily ahead; I seemed the only one that saw her. I tried to speak—to touch you, to draw your attention to her, but could not move. Father drove on and on, and mother seemed to hover just before us, now waving us back, now wringing her hands in grief. And I could not move—I could not utter a word. Then a great bottomless pit seemed to open just before us. I could see it plainly, but father drove straight on. As he fell down, it seemed forever and ever—I thought I heard mother's voice crying. Then I awoke, trembling and damp with a cold sweat."

For several moments neither spoke, but then Minnie, rallying, uttered:

"But, after all, Mary, darling, it was only a dream, and we must not let that discourage us. Think how father would feel if he saw us sad or despondent. He would blame himself for bringing us out here so far from home. And then—your old motto—hope for the best. To-morrow you will be the first to laugh at your fears of to-day."

Mary smiled, but did not reply in words. And then she changed the stakes to which the mules' lariats were fastened, that they might have better grazing.

Scarcely had she accomplished this than a faint exclamation from Minnie startled her. Quickly turning, the maiden beheld her sister gazing fixedly toward the opposite hillside, her eyes widely distended, her cheeks pale as with apprehension.

"Minnie—what is it? What do you see that frightens you?" hastily uttered Mary, as she glanced rapidly to the younger maiden's side.

"I think—I'm sure that I saw a man jump behind that rock—the big one with the thick bush upon its top," faintly murmured Minnie.

"Are you sure it wasn't father?" muttered Mary, keenly eying the point indicated.

"Yes—it was dark, almost black, as it crossed the sunshine there. It looked like—like an Indian!"

"Most likely it was your fancy, Min. But we will soon know. If an Indian, we will hear from him soon. Come—be brave. Don't show that you were frightened. Turn your eyes away. Look as careless as you can. Good. Now go and get in the wagon. Leave the curtain up. If there is only one—or even two, we can manage them, I guess. Go now—but quietly."

While speaking, Mary was rapidly thinking. She knew that if Minnie was not deceived, their freedom if not lives were in imminent peril, for even were the savages of a tribe professedly at peace, they could never resist such a temptation as this.

In a moment she had taken in the entire situation, and resolved upon the best course to pursue. She knew that, if the Indians really meant mischief, the wagon was their only refuge.

True, its sides were of thin pine boards that would not turn an arrow, much less check a bullet. But these, together with the canvas covering, would conceal their forms so that a shot must be aimed almost at random.

And to discharge these shots, the enemy must expose themselves to the occupants of the wagon. Knowing this, Mary relied upon being able to pick them off in time.

She was more confident because she felt assured that there could not be more than two or three of the Indians, else they would have advanced at once, boldly and openly, since the valley contained only one light, small wagon. Then, too, why their suspicious skulking, if friendly?

A quick glance showed Mary that Minnie was safe within the wagon, taking with her one rifle; the other rested against the bed, where it had been placed while changing the mules.

Mary glided rapidly to the wagon, then stooped as if to tie her shoe, close beside the rifle. This action was to cover the quick glance cast toward the suspected rock.

The maiden felt her heart throb rapidly as she saw that Minnie had not been deceived. Just stepping from his covert, she beheld a tall, half-naked Indian, bearing a rifle in his hand.

With marvellous quickness, Mary rose direct and turned round, facing full toward the savage. He started as if to spring back, but then paused as the maiden raised one hand, its open palm turned toward him. For a moment he hesitated; then the half-poised rifle was lowered and he started forward.

Mary instantly caught her rifle and flung its muzzle forward. With ludicrous celerity the red-skin again paused, as if nonplused.

"Who are you—what do you want?" said Mary, mechanically, without a thought of being understood.

"Me frien—want talk," promptly replied the savage.

"He is not an enemy—thank God!" exclaimed Minnie from within the wagon.

"Wait—he may be lying," replied the sister, more prudently; then adding, to the Indian, "Stop—I'll shoot if you come any nearer. How do I know that you speak the truth?"

"Injun talk straight—don't never lie," replied the red-skin, with a fair share of dignity.

"Then lay down your rifle on the rock by you. Do that and you may come in."

The Indian hesitated, and though she could not hear a word, nor yet detect his lips moving,

Mary felt half-convinced that he was consulting with others. After a minute's pause, he added: "You lay gun down, too, den."

"Very well," was the prompt reply, and Mary adroitly thrust her rifle into the wagon, adding in a low tone: "Keep close watch, sister, on those rocks. Be ready to fire, if I do. I have my revolver and can manage this brute if he tries mischief."

The reader may think strange that the maiden should agree to the Indian entering the camp peacefully, if she suspected him of treachery, but a moment's reflection will give her reason.

If the Indians were peaceably disposed, it would be worse than folly to irritate them into an attack. By treating them kindly, all trouble might be averted.

And then, if they really meditated treachery, she was taking the best course to meet it. This would insure her first blow being a deadly one.

Whether the Indian was satisfied with Mary's movement or not, he gave no evidence to the contrary. Laying his rifle and ammunition upon the rock, he glided down and across the valley. Gaining the encampment he extended his hand as in friendly greeting, while a smile wreathed his greasy features.

Mary knew now that he meditated treachery, but she did not flinch, though her cheek paled, and the glow deepened in her eyes. A faint, cautious whisper from the wagon gave her the cue.

"Beware, Mary—some one behind the rock has slipped away his rifle. I can see it pointing toward you now."

"All right—mark the spot, and shoot at the smoke. Don't fear for me," muttered the woman, between her teeth, her lips not moving.

"How—how?" grunted the Indian, extending his hand, an exultant glitter shining in his snaky eyes.

"How do you do, brother?" quietly replied Mary, as she lifted her hand.

It was her left hand. At the same time she advanced a pace with her left foot. The movement put her *en profile*, her right side toward the wagon.

Had she doubted the truth of Minnie's words, the maiden could not have misread the venomous glitter in the Indian's eyes as his broad palm closed upon hers. Tightening his grip, the Indian flung out his left arm, intending to clasp the girl to his breast, thus making her a shield against any shot from the wagon.

But he was doomed to disappointment—and worse. The brave girl was ready for his action, and promptly frustrated it.

As she stepped forward, her right hand was thus thrown out of sight. Until then her hand had been hidden in her pocket. Now it was drawn forth, clasping a revolver; a Smith and Wesson, seven-shooter, ivory-handled and silver-plated. A very pretty toy to look at, but in experienced hands, a terrible enemy at close quarters.

As she read his purpose, Mary swiftly raised her hand until the gleaming tube struck the savage full in the face. At the moment of contact, the hammer fell and a half-smothered report followed.

With a horrible, gurgling cry, the savage reeled back, both hands seeking his face. The bullet, tiny as it was, had pierced his brain.

At the instant of firing, Mary had crouched low down, and sprung to one side. The precaution in all probability preserved her life.

Almost like an echo, though tenfold louder, a rifle-shot rung out from the rock on the hillside, and a bullet cut the air close above her head, then passing through the canvas cover, spent its force upon the rocks beyond. Scarcely a thought later, came a third report, this time from the wagon.

Minnie strictly obeyed her elder sister, keeping her rifle leveled toward the rock as she lay flat upon the bottom of the wagon-bed. As she saw the tiny curl of smoke and heard the report, she fired with nerves as steady as when, in days gone by, she had practiced upon the sand snipe that ran along the prairie before her Colorado home.

Half-drowned by the report, a wild, unearthly shriek of horrible agony rung upon the air, and from the rocky covert a bronzed warrior sprang quivering into the air, falling to the ground a corpse. The bullet had pierced his right eye.

Mary did not pause to await further developments, but darted at once to the wagon, and springing upon the tongue, was safely within the bed ere the sulphurous smoke had cleared the wagon cover. Grasping her rifle, she raised

the hammer and crouched down in readiness to use the weapon.

Minnie, now that actual danger threatened, was in no wise behind her sister in coolness and bravery. Lying upon her back she was already driving home the well-leathered bullet. Though so gentle and retiring in every-day life, the knowledge that she had slain an Indian gave her no compunctions. A true daughter of the West, their barbarity had led her to class them among ravening wild beasts.

"Do you see anything of them, Mary?" she hastily muttered, as she capped the weapon.

"Only two—yours and mine," slowly replied Mary, alluding to the dead savages.

"Maybe these two were alone."

"Possibly; but that would be too good fortune. I can not help thinking of my dream," gloomily added Mary.

"It was a dream, nothing more. Even if there are others, we can beat them off until father returns."

"That is my greatest fear now—for him. He is so brave, and loves us so, that seeing us attacked would set him wild. He would not think of caution, but would rush upon certain death. If we could only warn him!"

"Perhaps we can, if we see him in time. By our firing from in here, he would see that we were safe, and then he would know the ground."

"Sh!" hissed the maiden, as the light rifle rose to her cheek, but even as the white finger touched the set trigger, her head was slightly uplifted.

"What is it, Mary?"

"I had a glimpse of two Indians then, but they've hidden again. To the right of where your game lies, notice a moss-spotted rock. They are behind it. The cowards! skulking from two girls!" and the red lips curled with scorn.

"I'm content that they should," and Minnie laughed slightly. "But they've had a specimen of our shooting, and—Mary, we are lost!" she abruptly added, in an agitated tone. "There are more coming, near the hill-top yonder. I saw them dodging behind the rocks!"

"Sure it was not father?"

"He would be alone—I saw three or four."

"So be it, then," Mary rejoined, desperately, her black eyes glowing. "Let them come. We are only two girls, but they may pay dear for their victory. Minnie, you are not afraid?"

"Not so much so that my nerves are unsteady. I think I can send a bullet home," she quietly replied.

"See to your pistol. We will need them, if only for ourselves. You know what the lot of a captive woman is in their hands?"

"I understand you. But see—too late! They have reached that pile of rocks. They mean to get where they can rake the wagon from end to end!"

Mary quietly dropped the curtain, only severing a small hole through which she could take aim. The end was near. Their forms nearly filled the narrow wagon-bed from side to side. A raking fire must be fatal.

CHAPTER III.

THE LONE LADY OF THE HILLS.

"WHAT is your opinion, Mat?" at length asked Cook, resting the strange missive thoughtfully.

"I hain't got none. I'm all mixed up, like. If we could only catch the squaw as sent that, mebber we could know better," and Anderson scratched his head doubtfully.

"It's plain enough she's a friend, anyway," ventured Dane, pacing up the hillside. "Maybe a white captive—who knows?"

"White granny! Captyves don't run round loose like that, nowadays. Mebbe—mind yer, I on'y say mebbe—it's a plan—a sell. Mebbe them words is a 'cute lie, got up jist to skeer us away from the diggin's."

"But who would do it? You say the track down yonder was that of a woman."

"I don't say anybody'd do it; I'm on'y s'posin' a case. S'posin' somebody else knows thar's gold here—it's not unlikely. They don't want to share 'th us. How kin they drive us off? By fightin'? That thought be onhealthy, bein' as we karry barkefs—the kind that bites, too. S'posin' they don't know who we are—likely ag'in. Mebbe they think we're green-horns. S'posin' we war—what'd skeer us off quicker'n Injuns? 'thin'."

"But the woman."

"'Twouldn't be the fust, by a heap, that hed a Injun squaw 'th 'em. I've toted more'n one, myself, in my time."

"Is this your real opinion of the matter?"

"It's one way. T'other is, that the hull thing is bony-fdy true. The critter may hev white blood in her. Mebbe some white feller hed did her a good turn, an' so she tries to pay it back. Some Injuns is that-a-way—but not very many."

"Come, come, Mat," impatiently cried Cook. "You're the oldest, and have had more experience than all the rest of us put together, so we naturally look to you for advice. Drop your suppositions, and come to the point, won't you?"

"Wal, I'll tell you jist what I'd do 'f I war alone. Fust, I'd look 'round a bit. I wouldn't be sech a durned fool as to run away from a pile o' gold jist 'ca'se somebody hollered Injuns. Thar's a plenty o' hidin' places here in these hills. Ef the buckskin is true, we'll see or hear the Apash to night. Ef they don't show up, then it's a sell. Ef they do, then we kin tell better whether it's best to buck ag'inst 'em or to make tracks. To my notion, thar's nothin' else we kin do. How long'd it take to ketch up our critters from the valley yender, ef they've scattered, as in co'se they hev? Then, how fur could we ride over yender prairie afore the Apash'd sight us? Tharfore, I say stay here ortil night, anybow. Ef we must make tracks, it must be onder kiver o' the dark."

"I believe he is right, boys," thoughtfully uttered Cook. "And I for one hate to leave this gold if there is the slightest chance of carrying any with us."

The young men eagerly coincided, perhaps because they were ignorant of the real peril should the Apache have discovered them. Brave, hot-headed and well-armed, a brush with red-skins—not too severe, of course—was just what they secretly pined for.

"Then it's a stay—for a time, anyhow. Wal, 'twon't do to work any more now. I'm goin' to take a little scout round the hills; mebber I kin find that squaw, or I'arn somethin' o' these Apash. 'Ll you fellers stay here?"

"I'm going with you, Mat," said Paul Jayne.

"I don't think there'll be any real darger," said Cook, musingly. "If the warning is in good faith, the Apache must have seen us yesterday or last night, else how came she to give us the warning this morning? For their own skins they'll try to take us by surprise. Then let's divide into three parties. You can hunt the squaw, and I will take a look after the mule's. We can meet here in a couple of hours; that will give us ample time to find a hiding-place before night."

"Mebber it'll do 'f ye're not too brash. Be jest like you youngsters to run your heads right spang in a ho'net's nest," commented Anderson, not exactly satisfied.

But the boys had wills of their own, and he knew there was little use in disputing them. So it was settled that Dane should go with Cook, Jayne with Mat, while the cousins bore each other company. Then with renewed cautions they separated. Mat going up the hillside, where he had lost sight of the mysterious squaw.

Little did they dream of the consequence of this bold and rash step, of the peril that lay before them, of the danger and trials they must undergo before the reunion took place, if at all.

"Now, Ed," observed Cook, as the party separated, "we'll strike over the point into the valley yonder, and look to the animals. There may or may not be danger, as you know, but if there is, we must work together. Either you take the lead, or else follow me."

"I'd sooner trust your head than mine, Cook," returned Dane, who had been not a little impressed by the Californian's discovery of gold.

"All right—then do just as I do, whether you think it right or wrong. Doubt would be still worse in case of trouble."

"Then you do think—"

"I scarcely know what I do think, Ed, but something tells me that we are bound to see trouble before we're out of this scrape," thoughtfully added Cook.

"Well, strike out. I'll watch you, and do the best I know how when the time comes—if it does come," Ed quietly responded.

Cook, with his rifle trailing in one hand, sprang forward, rapidly scaling the hillside, quick and surefooted as the mountain goat. What Dane lacked in practice, was made up by strength and length of limb.

As he neared the ridge, Cook used more caution, and finally paused beside a huge gray boulder, from whence he could peer down into

the valley where their mules had been turned loose to feed—of course being hopped. The diamond-seekers had chosen these animals not for speed or beauty, but because of their superiority over horses in rock-climbing and difficult traveling, a great deal of which they expected to do. The diminutive, gray, rat-like Mexican mules were active and surefooted, and would fatten where a horse would starve to death—a thistle or thornbush they considered a luxury.

"I see one of the mules," muttered Dane.

"Yes—but wait. They are there, I know, but there may be something more dangerous. Use your eyes well, now; take the valley, while I search the hill."

A long and careful scrutiny satisfied the friends that nothing was to be apprehended, and then they descended into the valley. As yet they had only noticed one mule, and though that was tolerable proof that the others were near, something might possibly have separated them.

"Yonder they are, now," and Dane pointed up the valley.

"I see, but—Hist! down, man, down!"

The last words were hissed through Cook's clinched teeth with startling force, and his strong hand closed with crushing force upon the young man's arm. And as he uttered the warning, the Californian sunk suddenly upon the ground, amidst the rank growth of grass and weeds.

"What is it?" muttered Dane, as he cocked his rifle; but though his face was pale, he did not tremble, or give the faintest sign of fear.

"Something—an Indian, I thought, upon the hillside yonder—near that red, cone-shaped rock. There—"

"I see it—lay still," hastily muttered Ed, as the rifle rose to his cheek, and his eye glanced along the clouded tube.

"Stop—don't shoot—it's a woman!" cried Cook; but only his lightning-like motion frustrated the deadly aim.

As he spoke, Cook saw the finger pressing the trigger, and instantly flung back his open hand. As the hammer fell it was caught upon his open palm.

"Cock it, Ed," whispered Cook, his eyes once more reverting to the hillside, "but don't shoot until I give the word. I only see the one—perhaps 'tis the one who sent us that warning."

Dane raised the hammer and freed his friend's hand. The small nipple had cut deep into the flesh, but Cook did not feel pain then, nor heed the blood that spurted from the wound.

Both pair of eyes were directed toward the cone-shaped boulder, at the base of which stood the figure first noticed by Cook. Sudden as had been their concealment, it was evident that the stranger had observed them, for with one hand shading the eyes, she was gazing steadily toward them.

A brief scouting satisfied the Californian that the stranger was alone, and in his belief that she was the sender of the warning, he arose and held his open palms toward her, in token of amity. The rifle lay hidden at his feet.

The squaw—for such she seemed—appeared startled at his abrupt uprising, and shrunk back, half turning to flee. But his gesture—the prairie truce—checked her flight.

"Speak to her—maybe she can understand you," suggested Dane.

"Stand up, then, but leave your rifle. She must have seen us both, and that will show her we mean no treachery."

Then raising his voice he addressed the stranger:

"Can you speak English?"

"Yes," came the answer, clear and distinct.

"Good! Then tell me—are you a friend or an enemy?"

"I am a friend to all honest white people, but there are enemies, cruel and treacherous enemies, close at hand. You were of those I warned—then why are you here? Are you weary of life that you tarry here, when the snare of death is closing in upon you? Take warning—an hour of delay may prove your death-warrant. Seek safety in flight if you would live to see the morrow's sun rise. To-night you and your friends will be murdered," rapidly and earnestly cried the stranger, in tones that could not be doubted.

"Who are you, then? You are an Indian?" curiously asked Cook, his wonder at such speech overcoming all else.

"No—I am white, like yourself. What I was once matters little now, for I am dead to the world—the world is dead to me," and her voice sunk until it was barely audible.

As she stood there, clearly outlined by the bright sun against the reddish rock, the strange

woman formed a remarkable picture. And the two comrades gazed upon it with wondering eyes.

She was tall—unusually so for a woman—and of erect carriage. Her skin was dark, yet lighter than that of an Indian, clear and healthful. Jetty black hair hung in masses below her waist. A band, shaped like a coronet, encircled her brow, glittering in the sunlight like beaten gold. To this was attached a number of eagle-plumes, their tips stained scarlet. A neatly-fitting waist of whitely-bleached doeskin covered her bust and waist, in perfect symmetry. A gayly embroidered tunic or skirt reached to her knees, and, with leggings and moccasins, completed her costume. In the girdle, at her waist, gleamed the haft of a knife; in one hand she held a tightly-strung bow; above the left shoulder peeped the top of a quiver, filled with feathered shafts.

The distance precluded more than a general idea of the stranger's features.

"But why are you, a white woman, consorting with the Apaches? Trust yourself to our protection, and we will see you safe with your friends and people," earnestly cried Cook.

"I have no friends—no people. And I fear you pledge more than lies in your power. You may not be able to preserve your own lives, even when unincumbered with a woman. Yet I thank you for your brave offer, though I must refuse it. I have ties here that I cannot break. No—think not of me; seek to save yourselves. The danger is great—very great!" and raising her hand in warning, the strange being turned to ascend the hill.

"Wait—one moment," cried the Californian. "At least tell us your name that we may remember you as a friend, not a stranger."

"I have no name—I have been dead to the world for fifteen years! Remember—you are warned!"

Turning, she sprang lightly up the hillside with a lithe activity that proved her long training. Once more she paused upon the ridge to repeat the warning gesture, and then disappeared from view of the comrades below.

"Well!" finally exclaimed Dane, drawing a long breath. "Here is an adventure with a vengeance!"

"Eh? Did you speak?" muttered Cook, starting up as if from a dream.

"Strikes me I did," dryly returned Ed. "You seem to be struck with our fair savage."

"I'm a fool—but the voice, the form—and then the time—fifteen years! It all opened the wound I thought forever closed. I almost believed that I saw my Jessie before me. But that is folly—she could not be here," muttered Cook, brushing a hand across his forehead, as though to banish the tormenting memories.

"Maybe it is—such things have been, you know," eagerly put in Dane, who was a confirmed novel-reader. "Did the Indians have anything to do with it?"

"No—she married and went to England," shortly replied Cook, arousing himself with an effort. "But come—we must go."

"Where?"

"First, up the valley, to see the mules. We must tie them up, for we may need them before long, if that woman spoke true—and I believe now that she did. Then we must join the boys and tell them what we have seen and heard."

"But you—you're sure there's no mistake about—" muttered Ed a little doubtfully.

"Mistake—about what?"

"This woman—you're sure she ain't the same one you used to know—the one you called Jessie? Just think what a story it would make—"

"Let up on that, Dane," and Cook's face darkened. "If I unwittingly gave you a glimpse of my past life, let that satisfy you. It is my secret—and you will only make bad blood by harping upon the matter. So drop it, unless you are anxious for a quarrel."

"Bless you, man, I don't want to quarrel with you. Only I couldn't help thinking—"

"Keep to the right there—the mule will dodge you, if you don't look sharp. Turn it up the valley."

Half an hour later, their task was accomplished. The mules were secured in a secure nook, their hopple-ropes were serving as halters, and an ample quantity of green boughs placed before them. While this lasted, there was little danger of the animals betraying their whereabouts by stamping or braying.

"Which way now, Cook?"

"Back to the rendezvous, I guess, though we will have to wait for the others, unless they, too, are ahead of time."

"Mat and Jayne must be to the west of us,

from the way they set out. S'pose we climb the hill yonder, and maybe we'll meet them," suggested Ed.

"It may be as well, seeing we have to gain the other valley anyway. Come on, then," and the comrades breasted the steep ascent.

"Hark!" and with the exclamation, Cook abruptly paused and bent his ear, when midway up the hill. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"The sound of fire-arms, I thought—listen."

"I can hear nothing," said Dane after a pause of acute listening. "In which direction?"

"From over the hill, I thought, but I may have been deceived. An uncertain sound always seems to come from the direction in which one is looking."

"Maybe we can see from the hill-top."

"Right; but be cautious. Keep your weapons ready; though we have nothing to fear from those who were firing. It must have been miles away."

The men cautiously advanced, and in a few moments gained the crest of the hill, and crawling forward, keeping behind the numerous boulders, they gained a position that commanded a fair view of the valley below them, or rather a portion of it—that upon their right. A dense clump of stunted trees and shrubbery cut off part of the view they would otherwise have had.

Scarcely had they crouched down, when the faint sound of several rifle-shots, clearly following each other, came to their ears. They could no longer doubt the evidence; their friends must be in danger.

"What had we better do?" excitedly muttered Dane.

"What is your opinion?"

"The boys must be in danger, and I say let's take a hand in!"

"Good! you'll do, Ed. Come on, then. We must skirt this brush-patch—the sound comes from beyond that. Once around it, we may see what is going on. Follow me, and keep close up."

"All right; but hurry, or it will be over before we can get there."

Though really anxious for the fate of his friends, whom he believed concerned in the firing, Cook could not help smiling at Dane's eagerness. Though green in some respects, Ed was nothing of a coward.

They hastened forward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, and soon cleared the patch of underbrush. In their eagerness they forgot all thoughts of caution, and rushed on with a reckless disregard of noise, stumbling, slipping and sliding, as they began the steep descent.

But they were soon awakened to a sense of their imprudence, and driven to think of their own peril. A shrill whicker broke the air, unmistakably the neigh of a horse.

"Down behind the rock, Ed," muttered Cook, squatting low down, and raising the hammer of his rifle. "It came from round that point."

"You think it's Indians?"

"What else? Who else would be riding horses here in the mountains?" and Cook glanced keenly into the face of his comrade.

What he read there was gratifying, and a stern smile lighted his face, for he knew that he could depend upon Dane as upon himself. And nothing nerves a man more surely than such a confidence, for it tells him he has only one life to fight for—his own.

"Maybe it was only an accident—that is, we may not have been heard," muttered Dane.

"No—if the Indians are there, we will have to fight, for the horse was startled by our noise. They act as sentinels, and will direct their masters where to look for us."

"Well, give a fellow a chance—I mean, don't shoot before I can spot my man. Seems to me a man must be hard to draw a bead on."

"What—you are not afraid—"

"Not for myself, but I don't know whether I can drop one of the imps the first shot or not. It's a new game to me," quietly replied Ed, and again Cook smiled. He understood the young man. The time had been when he himself felt the same doubt.

"If you miss, I'll crow over you, sure, Ed. But list—you hear that?" he hastily added, as a slight rattling sound told of a displaced stone rolling down the hillside.

He knew now that the enemy were afoot, and felt a stern, wild joy in the thought that he must soon be engaged in a deadly struggle, even though its end, in all probability, must be death. And then the two rifle-barrels peered over the top of the boulder.

A brief description can hardly give a correct

idea of the spot where the two comrades were now at bay. The point they had chosen to descend, resembled the blunted point of the letter V. They had kept on the right side of this ridge. At the hill's base, the valley swept round on either hand. Directly before the point, a narrow defile led out to the level ground beyond the foot-hills. Half-way up the hill, a narrow ledge of rock ran transversely, like a belt, some six or eight feet in width. Above and close beside this natural road, rested the boulder behind which our friends crouched. Their rifles commanded the road where it turned round the ridge, but from above, below and behind, they would be exposed to full aim. A single leap would carry them into the wood. From around this point had come the sounds they heard.

"Look! I can see the top of one's head—there are the feathers—see!" hurriedly whispered Dane.

"I see—but keep cool. Squat low, and wait," muttered the Californian.

The plumed head-dress slowly rose until the eyes of a savage were visible. Then it remained motionless, as the Indian closely scanned the hillside. A moment later two men appeared. Knowing that discovery would not long be delayed, Cooke gave the word, and two reports were blended with a terrible, blood-curdling shriek, and then the heads disappeared.

"I didn't miss it!" cried Ed, exultantly.

"Follow me—to the rocks yonder!" shouted Cook, leaping into the wood, closely followed by Dane.

Knowing that, after the first shot, it would be impossible to hold this station, Cook had sought another. Fifty yards away, along the road, he saw several boulders piled up like a fort, hollow in the center. Once inside these, they could at least sell their lives dearly.

A storm of angry yells followed the death-shots, and a volley of bullets hurtled around the fugitives, as the savages darted forward in pursuit, numbering over a score in all.

Side by side the comrades reached the rock, and Cook sprang lightly over it, then Dane. To their horror they felt themselves falling—down—down!

CHAPTER IV.

THE OVERSHADOWED CAMP.

NOR was that day to pass by without giving other of the diamond-seekers good cause for remembering it, and to them—the cousins, Bryan and Gilmore—we must now revert.

They had set off up the valley without any particular purpose in view, unless it was that of searching for "sign." And their hope of finding this in that rocky section, inexperienced as they were, was far more sanguine than well-founded.

For the first hour nothing occurred to interest them, or check their progress. The foot-hills seemed deserted by all save themselves.

"We may as well turn back, Harry," at length observed Sam, brushing the perspiration from his brow. "There's no sign in this direction—and then it's such confounded rough traveling."

"Ha! ha! I've been listening for that for an hour, nearly, lad," laughed Gilmore, gleefully. "Own up that I can outfoot and wind you!"

"Not when there's anything to be gained by it. But I do say that I'd prefer a pipe while lying down in the shade, to this rock-climbing."

"Well, I'll tell you. Let's cross over to that next ridge, and then if we see nothing, we'll about face for camp."

"Strike out, then. But I'd agree to eat all the red-skins there are in these hills, for lunch, without either salt or pepper," grumbled Bryan.

"I think it's a stall, myself. But we'll see to-night."

The cousins relapsed into silence, for further conversation was almost impossible while clambering over, under or around the broken and jagged masses of rocks, that were in places half screened by shrubbery and rank-growing vines. However, though at the expense of sundry annoying bruises and scratches, the cousins gained the valley.

"Say—hold on, Harry," panted Bryan, as he squatted upon a boulder, dolefully rubbing his shin. "What's the use of going up that hill just for the fun of turning round and coming down again? Let's keep right on down the valley."

"You can wait here—I'm going up as we intended. You can rest, Sam, until I come back," coolly added Gilmore, his eye twinkling.

"Yes—then you'd crow over me to-night at

the camp. No ye don't—I'll stick to ye tighter 'n a woodtick."

Laughing, Gilmore crossed the valley and began ascending the hill, with Sam Bryan close at his heels. Suddenly they both paused.

"What's that?" cried Gilmore, throwing forward his rifle.

"A rock—can't you see? It's big enough, and makes enough noise, too," returned Bryan, as a goodly-sized boulder bounded past them with frightful velocity and force, covering them with dust and dirt, then settling in repose far out in the valley.

"Yes—but what started it? That's the question."

"Got tired of lying still, perhaps, and took to rolling for a change. They often start without help. I've noticed it, dozens of times, on our own hills."

"Yes; in the spring, when the frost rots the ground, but not at this time o' year, I tell you—there!"

Gilmore suddenly interrupted himself, and then bounded like a mountain goat to one side; an example that was faithfully imitated by Sam. And one moment later would have been their death, for a huge jagged boulder, weighing tons, crashed resistlessly over the very spot where they had crouched.

"There's your answer, Sam," muttered Gilmore, his eyes glowing, "and a better one than I could give you. Those rocks never started without help."

"You don't mean that they were rolled at us?"

"Look yonder!"

As he spoke, Gilmore pointed up the steep hillside. Near the crest, Bryan now detected the figure of a man, crouching down beside a huge boulder.

With a power that seemed superhuman, this man pushed the moss-grown boulder from its bed, and sent it thundering down the hillside. As it gathered momentum, he rose erect and raised his arms wildly, uttering a hoarse, roaring cry that sounded almost unearthly.

The comrades, after the first glance, naturally turned their attention to the passage of the boulder, that now came dashing down like an avalanche, followed by smaller stones and debris that its force had torn loose. To their relief the boulder was gradually veering to the left, bidding fair to give their position a wide berth.

But then one of its erratic bounds carried the boulder full against a huge mass of rock, and failing to shake the pile, was cast diagonally aside. A knowledge of their danger came too late for the young men to do aught to avert it, and awe-stricken they crouched to the earth, directly in the path of the huge boulder.

Another bound—a hoarse rushing sound—and then Harry and Sam felt themselves crushed irresistibly to the ground while the thunderous sound rapidly receded.

Truly their escape had been a narrow one, and only their crouching so low down saved their lives. As it was, the jagged boulder barely missed their persons, as it bounded along.

Thus, half stunned and blinded by the debris that had well-nigh buried them, the two friends staggered to their feet, and brushing the dirt from their eyes, glanced wildly around. Nothing could be seen of the strange man who had saluted them in such a novel manner. The hill crest seemed unoccupied, and he had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

"What do you think it was, Harry?" muttered Bryan, after a moment's silence.

"I don't know—it looked like a devil—or some wild beast walking on his hind legs!"

And the brief glimpse he had obtained, partially favored this last idea. Indeed, this strange antagonist quite as nearly resembled a wild beast as a human creature.

A tall, massive form, seemingly clad in skins with the shaggy hair outside. Great masses of long matted hair around the head and face. And the voice had seemed that of a roaring wild beast.

Such was all that the fleeting glimpse impressed upon the memory of our friends. Little wonder then that they hesitated to pronounce the object a human creature.

"Look to your rifle, Sam," muttered Gilmore, his eyes glowing. "I'm going to see further into this matter before I return to camp."

"Here's with you, Harry," coolly added Bryan, entirely forgetting his natural indolence.

Slightly separating, holding their weapons in readiness for instant use, the young men slowly scaled the hill. They soon gained a point from

whence they could see that the real summit of the ridge was beyond where the wild-man had stood, that being a sort of shelf, running parallel with the ridge.

A few minutes' scrutiny satisfied the friends that the strange being must have fled, since the ledge was unoccupied, and then they advanced more boldly.

"Look—here is blood, Harry," muttered Bryan, pointing to a little pool of gore that filled a depression in one of the rocks. "And here's where he started the last rock—so it must be his."

"That's so—and see! yonder goes more blood—where he must have passed. Whoever he is, he's had hurt to bleed so much. Shall we trail him up?"

"Yes. Maybe he is—"

Bryan abruptly paused and exchanged glances with Gilmore. The same sound that had so startled Cook and Dane, as already narrated, now came to their ears with unmistakable distinctness; the report of fire-arms.

"It's from the next valley—maybe some of the boys in trouble," slowly uttered Gilmore.

"We can see from the ridge—if it is them, they may need our help," muttered Sam, as he sprang forward, closely followed by Harry.

After half a dozen bounds, the friends abruptly paused, with low murmurs of wonder. And a truly peculiar scene lay spread before them.

A beautiful valley lay winding at their feet. But its loveliness was now marred by death and evil passions.

A small white tilted wagon was plainly outlined against the green sward. Two mules danced at the length of their lariats in terror, kicking and plunging. Close beside the wagon lay the still struggling figure of a red-skin, his brawny limbs writhing in the agonies of death.

But stranger still the form of a woman—and by the garb a white woman—was there. Only for an instant; then she disappeared within the canvas-covered wagon.

"Tain't the boys," muttered Bryan.

"No—but there's a white woman in trouble—we must do what we can," hurriedly returned Harry.

"Yes—and like's not get peppered by the folks in the wagon for our trouble. It'd take a sharp pair of eyes to tell whether we are whites or reds just now," grumbled Sam, disgustedly, and not without cause, for the bounding boulder had plastered them with dust. "But go ahead—I won't take a dare from anybody."

"Keep your eye open for red-skins among the rocks then. If we sight them first, then we're all right," and Gilmore cautiously glided from one rock to another.

"The game's cuss then," abruptly added Sam, checking Harry, "for I can see two red devils now!"

Near the edge of the valley, well concealed from the eyes of those in the wagon but fully exposed to the view of our friends upon the hillside were two Indians, crouching low behind a boulder, apparently eagerly consulting.

"Down—squat low, Sam!" hastily muttered Gilmore, concealing himself behind the rock. "We can pick 'em off from here if needs be. But patience—let's see what they're up to first."

With rifles in readiness the two friends knelt there, peering through the scrubby bushes that grew close beside the boulder, eagerly scanning the scene below. That they should be excited was but natural, since this was their first real adventure with the savages, but their nerves were never more steady than at that moment.

The distance separating them from the red-skins was not more than sixty yards, and as they could not see any more than these two, the cousins felt that the game was fairly in their hands. This fact, in part, may account for their coolness.

That the savages had at length decided upon some plan of procedure soon became evident, for like shadows they darted forward and gained covert behind another boulder just within the edge of the valley.

"What's the use of waiting?" impatiently gritted Sam, his eyes glowing with a light new to them. "We know what they're up to—and law's on our side."

Harry Gilmore smiled grimly at this remark. The only law that had jurisdiction in that section was the law of the border—blood for blood.

"All right—now, before they can fire," he muttered, as he raised his rifle.

But only one report rung out, as the hammers fell. The worthless cap on the nipple of Bryan's rifle refused to explode.

With a fierce curse, Sam jerked back the

hammer and tore the cap away, then replaced it with a fresh one from his pocket.

At the report one of the red-skins sprung up, then fell to the ground, writhing in his death-agony. His comrade for a moment seemed petrified by this unexpected attack in the rear, and glared wildly around, unconsciously discharging his rifle when the muzzle pointed toward the heavens. Then with a yell of dismay as he caught sight of Gilmore bounding toward him, he leaped to his feet and fled at full speed up the valley.

But Bryan sprang up and leveled his rifle, his gray eye flashing along the tube, as it followed the rapid motions of the red-skin. A loud yell of exultation broke from his lips as he saw the Indian leap high into the air, falling upon the green sward in his death-throes as the rifle spoke. And truly Sam had cause to be proud of his "shot on the wing."

"Hooray! for we, us and company!" he yelled, as he sprung over the bowlder. "D'ye see any more, Harry?"

"No—and yet there may be others hidden among the rocks. Look to your revolvers, and if so we'll soon unearth 'em," coolly returned Gilmore.

"Thunder! what hair!" almost gasped Sam, his eyes wildly staring toward the wagon.

Mary Temple was just emerging from the canvas, and as her hair had become unfastened during the excitement, it covered her as with a veil, fully justifying Bryan's exclamation.

"I guess there are no more, or she would not be so venturesome," muttered Harry, as Mary flung back her hair and gazed steadily toward the cousins. "Come—let's go down and see what harm has been done."

Though glancing ruefully at his soiled and ragged attire, Sam followed Gilmore, with far more trepidation than he would have felt had she been the most formidable of savages. As they advanced, Mary turned her head as if addressing some one within the wagon, and then Minnie emerged.

As may be imagined, the cousins were not a little surprised to find that these two maidens were the only occupants of the wagon. Mary smiled as she noticed their looks cast around the spot, and said:

"You appear to be looking for something, gentlemen?"

"Excuse me—but I was wondering how it comes that we find you here alone, for surely you must have friends with you," stammered Gilmore.

"We expect father every moment—indeed he should have returned an hour since."

"But who—surely you did not kill—"

"Yes—sister Minnie and I. But your face is not familiar—surely you were not with the caravan from which we strayed?"

"No—we have been here for two months. Luckily we heard you firing, and came in time to punish a couple of the copper rascals."

"In good time, too, for had they once gained yonder point of rocks, we would have been completely at their mercy. We owe our lives to yourself and friend," earnestly said Mary, frankly extending her hand.

Of course Harry expressed his delight at having been of service to her, and then followed a mutual introduction, when fair-haired Minnie timidly greeted the stalwart Gilmore, mentally pronouncing him much more handsome with his jolly curls than the fairer cousin. And perhaps Mary entertained a similar suspicion concerning Bryan. Certain it is that in those few minutes the quartette became far better acquainted than they would have done in a month under less romantic auspices.

But as the minutes passed on without the return of John Temple, the uneasiness of his daughters grew deeper and more plain, now that they knew there were Indians abroad, bent upon mischief. For that the four who had been slain were the only ones in the vicinity, was far from likely.

Naturally the cousins thought of the strange warning that was now partially confirmed, and they felt that their comrades should be put upon their guard. Still, they were men, better able certainly to take care of themselves than these women.

"If I was certain nothing would molest you here," said Harry, turning to Mary, "I would go and search for your father. He may have wandered further than he intended, or perhaps have found your friends, and does not suspect your danger here."

"Oh, if you only will! I did not like to ask you, after what you had already done, but if you will be so kind—"

"I would do more than that to please you,"

abruptly whispered Gilmore; then as her face suddenly flushed at the plain meaning of his tone, he turned away, calling to Sam:

"You stay here, Sam, while I take a run over the hill to look for Mr. Temple. Keep a good—"

His caution was interrupted by a rifle-shot, coming clear and distinct to their ears, seemingly from just beyond the ridge last crossed by the cousins. A simultaneous cry broke from both Mary and Minnie Temple.

"It's father's rifle—he is in trouble! Go save him—for the love of God, help him!" gasped Mary, in agony of apprehension, that she would never have felt for herself alone.

"I will—but Sam must stay here to protect you," and Gilmore glided rapidly across the level valley.

"Go too—we can protect ourselves if there is any need—go—go!"

Sam caught up his rifle and darted after his fleet-limbed cousin, fired by the imploring glance of black-eyed Mary, with a half-formed fancy that it would be the most fortunate event of his life should he be wounded in her cause, so that she might nurse him back to life again. All of which goes to show that the poor fellow was already hard struck.

In suspense almost killing, the sisters waited, each minute seeming almost an hour, though no further sounds were heard from beyond the hill. And this fact apparently confirmed their worst fears, for they knew that John Temple was not one to tamely submit even to the force of numbers. Strangely enough they never once imagined that his shot might have been discharged at some game; Mary's presentiment, added to their own peril, forbade any but the worst construction.

And their fears seemed only too well founded as they saw the cousins reappear upon the ridge-top. Between them they bore a heavy load; what seemed the limp and lifeless form of a dead man.

With a low moan, Mary sunk to the ground, half fainting. Then Minnie gave evidence of her high courage, as she ever did at times the most trying. She became the comforter now—the staff upon which her sister leaned.

"Cheer up, sister," she murmured, "it may not be so bad. Perhaps he only fell and hurt himself. He cannot be dead, or they would have broke the news to us first, before bringing him here."

"Right, Minnie—you are more of a woman than I, after all. There—I will be calm. Help me arrange the mattress for him here in the shade. Hasten—hasten."

So slowly did the cousins descend the steep and rocky hill, that the sisters met them halfway. Their burden was indeed John Temple, covered with blood and dirt—a sad sight for his children's eyes to behold. Harry had flung his blouse across the man's breast, but it didn't lay flat. Near the middle, it rose to a point in a strangely significant manner.

As he heard their voices, John Temple lifted his heavy lids, and smiled faintly, as if to reassure them. But then they drooped, as a heavy groan of agony portended his pallid lips.

Nobly the sisters bore up, as they assisted the cousins with the heavy burden, though each moan of the wounded man seemed tearing their heart-strings. Temple swooned before they reached the wagon, and only for his fitful breathing, he would have been thought dead.

"How did you find him—tell me?" faltered Mary, after doing what they could to ease the wounded man's pain.

"We found him lying by a rock, beyond the ridge. He must have lain for some time insensible, but then recovering his consciousness, have discharged his rifle, in the hopes of your hearing it."

"And that?" shuddered the maiden, pointing to the blouse that covered her father's breast.

"It is where he is hurt," and Gilmore glanced keenly into her eyes; then as if reassured by what he read there, he added: "He was shot in the breast with an arrow, and for fear it would shock you too greatly, we covered it, as you see."

"Why did you not extract it?"

"I dared not try—he is too weak just now," evasively replied the young man, his eyes drooping.

"You are not candid with me—you think to hide the truth," cried Mary, hysterically. "You think we are children—that we have no courage."

"It may be better that you should know the worst, and at once," he gravely added, taking her hand. "If only that we can consult as to what had better be done, for the events of this

day have plainly shown that we are all in real danger. You will be careful—you can guard your feelings, for his sake?"

"Yes—go on," calmly added Mary, clasping Minnie's hand in her own. "After him there is nothing left for us."

"Then—though I may be deceived—I fear that your father's hours are numbered. The arrow is planted deep in his breast—the barbed head must be fast in the muscles of his back, for I could not move the shaft. I don't think we had better try to remove it, for it would only hasten his death."

Mary shuddered convulsively, but did not speak. And then, as the sisters bent their heads and wept together, Sam and Harry drew aside.

Their position was a peculiar one, yet they could not doubt as to the course they ought to pursue. These women had a deeper claim upon them, in their sorrows, than mere personal safety. While their arms could wield a weapon, the helpless ones should not come to harm.

Suddenly Sam started, and gazed intently up the hill, opposite to that where they had descended. Guided by his glances, Gilmore beheld two human figures dimly outlined against the crimson sky.

For a moment he seemed in doubt, but then an expression of hopeful joy lighted up his features. In an instant he sounded the peculiar whistle that had been used as a rallying signal for the diamond-seekers; and almost immediately it was echoed back from the hill-top.

"They are our friends, ladies," he hastened to explain, as the sisters started at the sound; "and so will they act as your friends, when they hear your story."

In a few moments more Old Double Fist and Paul Jayne joined the cousins, and were warmly greeted. Gilmore hastily explained the meaning of the strange scene.

"It's bad—pretty bad, boys," muttered Anderson, gloomily. "Better we had tuck that squaw's advice, an' pulled out o' here. But first—let me see this critter. He'll soon go under, unless that stick is got out o' his karkidge."

With a slight nod, and "how d'y," to the sisters, Mat removed the blouse, and cut away the clothing around the arrow. After a careful examination, he nodded to Gilmore.

"Squat down here, lad, an' rest his shoulders on your knees. I kin take it out, I reckon. It's a misty a'fa'r though. Apash arer, an' the skelp left! But never mind, mebbe I kin 'xplain it. Steady, now!"

Slowly and steadily the hunter bore down upon the shaft, while others held Temple's arms, as he groaned heavily. Shudderingly the daughters crept away, covering their ears to shut out the sickening sound.

Then, with his keen knife, Anderson cut through the skin, where the arrow had made a lump, after which he severed the feathered end, then drawing the shaft through the wound. The blood flowed freely, but this was soon checked by the rude surgery of the guide.

Wiping his hand upon the grass, Mat glanced at Harry and Sam. They saw that he had black news to give them. Glancing at Paul Jayne, they read the truth, even before Anderson spoke.

"I said I'd somethin' to tell ye, boys," muttered Mat. "Wal, then, Jim Cook an' Ed is gone under!"

CHAPTER V.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

WE left the tall Californian and his comrade, Ed Dane, just as they sprung into what seemed, from where they first observed it, a natural fort. In this small square, defended upon all sides by the rocks, they hoped to make a good fight before being rubbed out, selling their lives as dearly as might be.

They gained the outer side in safety, despite the bullets and arrows that hissed past them, the volley being too hastily aimed for success. Then, almost side by side, the comrades vaulted over the rock.

But, instead of alighting fairly upon the ground within, as anticipated, they felt themselves falling—falling through what, in the surprise, seemed an immense space. Fortunately, a pile of dirt, soft and springy, broke their fall, and glancing up, the hunters saw the trap they had fallen into.

Only a few yards above their heads was a nearly square opening cut through the rock. Around this were the oblong bowlders, serving much the same purpose as a curb does round a well.

A single glance showed our friends this; they had not time for more. Maddened by the death

of their comrades, the Apaches rushed forward as if to carry the stone fort by storm, the foremost following close after the fugitives.

Beyond all doubt, they were quite as much surprised by the result as were our friends, and with wild yells of dismay two savages came sprawling down through the hole, while a third managed to catch upon the edge and support himself by dropping his weapons, yelling lustily for help at his companions.

Cook and Dane were still gazing upward when the half-naked figures appeared, and rolling hastily aside they avoided an awkward collision. The sight of their enemies so close at hand quickly restored the Californian's coolness and decision, and he gritted:

"Use your pistol, Ed; it's either them or us!"

Dane had already realized the situation, and his revolver spoke full as soon as Cook's, before the Apaches recovered from the surprise of their tumble. Being almost within arm's length, even in that semi-darkness, there was little need of a second shot, and yet, like a great many others in their maiden affray, the taste of blood seemed to set Dane wild, and he emptied half the chambers of his revolver into the quivering body before he realized that his work was done.

Not so the Californian. The sight of blood appeared to set his nerves like steel, and he was never cooler. After touching the trigger, he gave no further thought to his game, but glanced quickly upward.

A fiery glitter filled his eyes as he saw several plumed heads overtopping the curb, where the Apaches were glaring in angry dismay adown the black hole that had swallowed up their comrades as well as their prey. Quick as thought the black muzzle was uplifted, and again its spiteful report reverberated through the den or cavern.

Through the film of smoke Cook saw that the weapon had not failed him. Like magic the row of feathered crowns disappeared; all but one, besides the savage who was frantically trying to climb up from the entrance.

The bronzed head half-lifted, then slowly sunk over the edge of the bowlder, while the brawny arms quivered and the muscular hands clinched and opened spasmodically in the throes of death. A tiny stream of black blood trickled from the stricken brave's forehead, dropping with a peculiar patter upon the upturned face of the other Apache, who now yelled aloud in terror.

Cook smiled grimly, and then touched Dane upon the shoulder, pointing upward. The young man read his meaning, and eagerly raised his weapon, but the excitement had unsteadied his nerves so that he could not secure an aim.

"Here, rest on this," and the Californian laughed with a chilling glee, as he outstretched one arm. "Take the rascal under the ear and put him out of his misery."

The pistol cracked, and Ed Dane eagerly watched the effect of his shot. A bloody patch marked the spot at which he had aimed, and a crimson spray fell over their upturned faces, yet the savage did not fall.

In the agony of death his fingers tightened their hold, and with a convulsive effort—the same that sent the death-shriek bubbling from his lips—he drew his body half way out of the hole; then for a moment remained stationary.

"Hold—don't waste your powder, Dane," coolly muttered Cook. "Save it against the time it's needed more. The varmint is dead; if only wounded, his screech would have sounded different from that. See! the body is beginning to slip down already."

"That makes three!" hoarsely gritted the young man, but without a grain of compunction for the blood he had shed; instead, his eyes glared strangely, and his form dilated with triumph.

That day marked the turning-point in his life. He had shed the blood of a human being, and exulted in the deed. He would never be the same as in days gone past. He had taken the step that put boyishness forever behind him. He was now a man.

Unconsciously, the Californian sighed as he read this change in his young friend. He remembered the time when he had taken the same step—when he felt the same half painful, half-ecstatic sensations that were now struggling for mastery in Dane's breast.

"The time must have come, sooner or later," he muttered, mechanically, as he dexterously reloaded the discharged chambers of his revolver, "and perhaps better that it is now. He will be a man now, only harder to control."

"What did you say?" asked Dane, with a long-

drawn breath, as the figure of the last-slain Apache suddenly slipped from its perch and fell heavily to the ground.

"Nothing—I was only thinking. But now load up—we may need every shot. Those bounds will not give us up so easy, if only for vengeance. They have a heavy score against us."

"'Twill be heavier before 'tis less," and again the deadly fire filled the young man's eyes. "Let them come—I don't care how soon. I'm not afraid of missing them now!"

"I'm in no hurry for them," laughed the Californian, "but I'm glad I wasn't deceived in you. I knew there was the making of a man in you."

"And you'll tell the boys that I was not afraid?"

"Indeed I will—if we ever see them again, that is. Just now our chances look rather slim."

"How so? We can pick them off as fast as they try to get in. We've got the advantage."

"In that sense, yes. But if we can keep them out, so can they keep us in. And unless we make up our minds to dine on cold red-skin, I don't see what there is to hinder them from starving us to death," quietly observed Cook.

While speaking he was not idle, but dragging the dead Apaches aside, he carefully examined their rifles. His own was unhurt, but the stock of Dane's was broken. This, however, was replaced by that of one of the Indians, a weapon seemingly quite as serviceable. Finding the right bullet-pouch, Cook directed Dane to change.

"Now do you keep a close watch upon the hole up yonder, while I try and locate ourselves. If there's another entrance we must find it before the Apaches or all's up. Blaze away at every inch of red-skin that shows itself, and call me if you need help."

Leaving his rifle with Dane, the Californian glided cautiously along the side of the cavern, groping with both hands and feet, to guard against another fall. By the faint light that shimmered through the hole in the roof, he could easily estimate the dimensions of the den, and when half the circuit was complete, he found the entrance to a tunnel-like passage apparently leading directly into the heart of the hill.

Even in the darkness Cook fancied he could detect the trace of tools wielded by the hands of man, perhaps in ages gone by. The passage appeared cut through solid rock, and was too regular in its lines to have been the work of nature alone.

A peculiar thrill crept over him, and for a moment he paused, gasping for breath. Remembering the presence of gold in the neighborhood, the thought struck him that perhaps he was even then standing within one of those stupendous gold-mines that have from time to time been discovered, to the wonder of the civilized world, ages after the hands that formed them were crumbled into dust.

With an effort he cast off this feeling, and completed the circuit. Dane started as he stood beside him.

"What have you found?" he asked, eagerly.

"There's a passage that leads back into the hill. How far, I don't know. There may be another entrance, but I hardly think it. At all events, we must remain here until the Apaches show their hands."

"I hope that will come soon—this waiting is not the most pleasant thing imaginable."

"Depend on't, the imps are up to some devilry," and the Californian laughed carelessly. "You'll see enough of them before it's over."

He was looking at Dane as he spoke, and abruptly paused, a change came over the young man's face like magic. The bloodthirsty glitter filled his eyes, and the lips drew back from the white, close-set teeth, and his rifle sprung to his shoulder.

"Keep cool!" muttered Cook, as he glanced upward. "Wait until I tell you. It's either a trick or the varmint is crazy!"

A plumed head-dress was slowly rising above the rocks above, and as he spoke, Cook could see the stiff black hair and forehead of a savage. Slowly these were raised until the eyes and nose of the savage were plainly revealed; then they remained stationary, as though peering down into the cave.

"Save your powder, Ed," and the Californian laughed gleefully. "The imps are only trying to find out whether we are still on guard."

"But it'll make one less," pleaded Dane.

"It's ill sport shooting a dead dog, Ed. Look at the eyes—did you ever see the like in a living man? No, no; they're glazed and sightless. It's

one of those we dropped out on the hillside. They're holding it up from behind the rock. Give them a yell—that will tell them we are not so easily fooled," and the Californian uttered a shrill, taunting cry, that was answered back from without by cries of angry chagrin, as the corpse was hastily lowered from view.

"But if there is another entrance," uttered Dane, as if recalling the words of Cook, "may not the Apaches know of it, and creep up to surprise us in the rear?"

"It is possible, but that is a risk we cannot avoid. Though as they did not know of this hole—as their following us proved—they may be ignorant of the other. I think we'd better watch here where we can keep the devils out. Let them once get in and we are gone, sure."

Lighting their pipes and drawing to opposite sides of the little earth mound, thus commanding all sides of the parapet, the comrades sunk into silence. Dane had enough to reflect upon in the new life that had been awakened within him; the Californian was brooding over the dead past. Thus they remained for an hour or more, when their meditations were brought to an end by a movement from the enemy without.

It was now night, but the sky was clear, the stars shining brightly, and the rocky parapet above was clearly defined. Suddenly a portion of the hole was obscured, and then with a rustling sound, a bundle of dried grass and brush came through the aperture.

"What does this mean?" muttered Dane, as he picked up the bundle.

"The imps intend trying fire—to smoke us out, I judge. But they must go to work differently from this," quietly replied Cook.

"Can they do it, though?"

"I could—and so may they, if they have common sense."

"I'd rather make a break-out there, and die like a man, fighting, than be smothered here like a skunk!" bitterly gritted Dane.

"Even if we could climb out—which we can't do without a rope—they'd pick us off before we'd get in a single blow. No; when the time comes, we must try the passage, yonder. That way we can fight the smoke longer—though it'll amount to the same in the end, I suppose."

"Why not start now?"

"Because they may try to enter. Wait until the fire is kindled, then they can't come in."

Several more bundles of inflammable materials were flung in, and then followed by several that were ablaze. With yells of exultation the savages now flung in dried sticks and branches, doubtless in the hope that the whites had not noticed the fall of the first bundles in time to prevent their taking fire. But a few moments convinced them of their mistake, as but a trifle of smoke escaped from the aperture.

After an hour more of painful suspense, the Californian frowned gloomily. He saw that the very ruse he had hinted at was now being put into execution.

"Get ready for traveling, Ed; we must try the passage," he muttered, picking up his rifle and several dried sticks that he had selected from the debris flung down.

Several slight poles were slid across the aperture above, and upon these grass and brush were piled. On top of all were piled green brush and weeds, to increase the suffocating smoke. A blazing torch was now thrust beneath the mass, instantly igniting it, the black smoke curling in a heavy cloud down the passage. As soon as the dried poles were burned through, the entire mass would be precipitated into the cavern, so fully ignited that to approach it would be impossible.

The comrades did not wait for this occurrence, but plunged at once into the passage, clasping each other's hands and proceeding with as great haste as possible. Already they fancied the damp atmosphere was impregnated with the subtle smoke.

"If we could only see," muttered Dane, ruefully rubbing his head that came in contact with a projecting point of rock.

"We will soon. That's what I brought these sticks for. I'll light them soon."

"Here's a passage leading to the left," suddenly cried Dane, after half an hour's groping from the time they left the cavern.

"If possible, that's the one we must take. Can you remember how the opposite side of the hill lay?" eagerly muttered Cook, as he knelt to light his rude torch that he had already prepared.

They spoke huskily and with rapidly increasing difficulty, for the smoke seemed to completely fill the narrow passage. Their nostrils seemed sore from breathing the pungent vapor;

their throats were dry and parched. Already they suffered no slight torture.

"If this goes straight, it must be the shortest. If it leads to the outer air, then we are safe—if not—"

Little need for Cook to conclude his sentence. Both knew what it meant. If not—then they were doomed to death—to death by suffocation the most horrible!

As the tiny torch flared up, Cook glanced around him, the thought of a gold-mine once occurring to him, but then he strode forward. Reeling, Dane followed him. The deadly vapor was fast weakening their brains.

Each moment was one of agony. Every breath seemed death. It was as though inhaling liquid fire. Only that the phantom-like figure before him moved onward, Dane would have sunk to the ground in despair. Scarcely without thought he followed in the footsteps of the Californian.

The flickering torch was held unsteadily, but still Cook staggered on, half-blind, gasping for breath, suffering tortures the most horrible. The ground beneath his feet grew more cool and damp, but he did not notice it, even when he began plashing through water several inches in depth. He did not heed the gasping moan for help as Edward Dane sunk to the ground, because it seemed only one of the phantom voices that shouted in his ear.

Then a cry of horror broke from his lips. The passage abruptly ended in a mass of earth. He could go no further!

The torch fell from his hand and expired with a faint hiss in the water. The smoke seemed doubly intensified. It choked—suffocated him. With a gasping moan, James Cook fell forward with a sudden splash. Then all was still.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH CARNIVAL AT MAT'S FORT.

"It's true; the boys is gone under," reiterated Mat, gloomily.

For a time the cousins, Gilmore and Bryan, were too greatly confounded to speak, but then they closely questioned Anderson and Jayne. But there was not a ray of hope to be gained from their words.

It seems that Mat and Paul soon lost the trail of the strange squaw upon the rocky ground, and then set forth on a reconnoitering expedition, penetrating the foot-hills to a considerable depth, though without finding any signs—at least recently-made signs of the presence in the vicinity of Indians. They were upon the crest of a hill nearly a mile distant when the sound of firearms attracted their attention, first to the valley where they now were, and then those shots discharged by and at Cook and Dane. The two latter and their antagonists were in comparatively plain view, and Mat detailed the stand, the flight and pursuit; and then the apparently desperate struggle within the stone fort.

"No—the boys is wiped out, for we could see the red imps roamin' all over the spot, as ef holdin' a pow-wow."

Drawing aside, the diamond-hunters earnestly consulted as to what was the best course to pursue. Beyond a doubt there was great danger impending, for, of course, the dead Apaches that lay around had formed part of the band Anderson had espied, and their long delay would doubtless be investigated.

"Only for the old man, we could strike for a hiding place that I know of—but it'd be the death o' him."

"Then you think he can live, if kept quiet?"

"No, I don't. Ef he hadn't the constitution o' a wild bull, he'd 'a' bin dead long ago. But even he can't stand it al'ays. I doubt ef he sees daylight ag'in."

"Poor girls!" muttered Gilmore, compassionately.

"Poor gals—shore enough; but come—for them gals we must set to work. There's boun' to be powder burnt afore day, an' we must git ready for it."

The keen eyes of Double Fist had already selected the spot that seemed most easy of defense, and in a few words made known his plan. Then the four pair of stout arms were strained to the utmost, lest the attack should come too soon.

Anderson rudely traced out an oblong square of some forty feet in length, by ten in width, the back being formed by the hill. Along this line the mules were employed in dragging heavy bowlders, upon which were placed still others, the crevices being snugly blocked up, so that in one hour's time a wall some four feet in height was formed around the traced line, im-

pervious to a rifle-ball or arrow. The rear was even better protected. The base of the hill was formed of an unusually heavy ledge of rocks, resting at an angle of perhaps forty-five degrees upon a level bed of slate-stone, sloping backward. The weather and action of frost, alternately freezing and thawing, had gradually rotted the slate-stone, so that it crumbled away from the harder rock, thus leaving a cavity that may be likened to the cut made in the lower side of a tree by an experienced chopper, preparatory to falling it. The ledge of rock rose up some forty feet above the level of the valley, and then the hill sloped back as usual. A line dropped from the edge, would have touched the valley ground at least ten feet beyond the outer wall of the little fort. Thus its defenders need only guard against attack from the valley, before and upon either hand.

The wounded man was tenderly placed in one corner of the little fort, resting upon the mattress, with his children beside him. The wagon was drawn up close to the hill, and the mules were tethered to the wheels.

Temple had recovered his consciousness, but seemed to be sinking rapidly, though in feeble tones he strove to reassure the fears of his children. Still their future seemed to be weighing heavily upon his mind, and seeing this, Gilmore sought to relieve his anxiety.

"As long as we can use a weapon, Mr. Temple," he cried, "no harm shall come to your daughters. I pledge you my word and that of my comrades, that we will fight for and protect them as though they were our sisters. And, God willing, we will see them safe home to their friends."

"You look and speak like an honest man," feebly muttered Temple, "and I thank you. As you deal with them, may God deal with you!"

Shortly after this his senses seemed to wander, and he raved of the past—then of some strange creature that appeared threatening his life. And as his eyes glowed with insanity, he seemed wrestling with this horrible foe.

Choking back their grief his children sought to quiet him, and after holding his arms until they were nigh exhausted, to keep him from injuring himself, the wounded man gradually quieted down and sunk into a fitful, broken slumber. Heart-sick and weary the sisters crouched beside him, dreading the approach of death that would leave them orphans.

Though crouching at the post, keenly scrutinizing the valley, Double Fist could not but hear the wounded man's ravings, and they deepening his desire to know whose hand had dealt the blow. Knowing the old guide's nature, Gilmore volunteered a solution.

Recalling his strange encounter with the wild man—for by no other term could he describe the hairy, skin-clad monster—he believed that Temple had fallen by his hand. Such in reality had been the case.

While returning after a disappointed search for his recent comrades, Temple fell, shot by an arrow. Then the wild man sprang upon him, and with a heavy club, almost crushed his skull, but the brief glimpse had indelibly imprinted the face and figure upon Temple's brain.

"No doubt you're right, Harry," muttered Anderson, "but it's queer that we never met the cuss afore. Think he was white?"

"I could only tell from his beard."

"I've seen Injuns as hairy as a grizzly—so that's no shore sign. Ef we onct get out o' this scrape, I mean to hev a hunt a'ter the critter, anyhow."

"But do you think we will—is there any hope?"

"You know the sayin'—whar thar's life, thar's hop'. We're wuth a heap o' dead critters yit. Mebbe these imps as you an' the gals rubbed out wasn't o' the same gang as them I see'd rub out Cook and Ed. Ef so, we mayn't be bothered, for they was too busy jist then to notice the rumpus you made here. But don't bet too much on that. I feel in my bones that we'll hev to burn powder—ax' lively, too, afore sun-up."

"If they should find us—what hope have we? They can hold us here until we starve!"

"With them mules thar? They're tough, but sweet."

"And water?"

"Thar we're short. But," and Nat lowered his voice, "we kin stand it until to-morrow night, an' then we kin travel. The old man'll be gone afore then—an' that's all that need hinder us."

A low whistle from Paul Jayne abruptly terminated the conversation, telling that he had discovered something. Gliding to his side, Mat

gazed keenly out upon the valley in the direction Paul indicated.

"It looks like a rock, but I saw it move."

For half an hour more the little band waited in stern suspense. During that time they became convinced that the Apaches were close at hand, and that their own position was known; indeed, the white-tilted wagon easily revealed that.

Knowing that the Indians must have discovered the dead bodies of the Apaches slain at the hill-foot, Mat felt assured that an attack would be speedily made, and giving the savages credit for his own judgment, he soon settled the points that most required guarding.

Favored by the formation of the hill, the Apaches could approach unseen to a point within fifty yards of the stone fort by closely hugging the rocks, while to approach in front, they would be exposed in the bright moonlight for fully twice that distance.

"They're comin', boys!" muttered Anderson, cocking his rifle. "See that glitterin' p'int o' light? It's the eend o' a rifle-bar'l. Keep cool, now. Don't fire until I do; then in order as you stan'. Ef they don't stop then, out wi' your 'volvers an'—"

He abruptly ceased speaking and raised his rifle. As it spoke, an Apache sprang out into the moonlight, in the agonies of death, his yell being echoed fiercely back from a score of throats, as the Indians leaped forward in a mad onset.

Cra k—crack—crack!

Crack—crack!

First came the rifle shots of the three men; then, with a double report, two spouts of flame-tinged smoke shot past the diamond-seekers. So unexpected was this aid, that each man turned his head in wonder.

Mary and Minnie stood there, rifle in hand, pale but determined. Instead of four, there were six defenders of the little fort.

Cowed by this deadly greeting, the Apaches, with yells of chagrin and surprise, hastily sought cover, leaving several of their number either dead or disabled on the ground. Convinced now that a desperate resistance would be made, they, being foiled in effecting a surprise, would now be more cautious.

"Minnie," said Gilmore, as he turned to the fair-haired maiden, "promise me not to risk yourself this way again. Think—had they been firing, you could scarcely have escaped being shot."

"We risked no more than you and our friends," Minnie quietly replied, as she recharged her rifle.

"True—but that is our duty, and we could easily have driven the dogs back alone. It will only unnerve us to see you exposed to such danger. And then your father—he is waking. Compose him if you can; much may depend upon it."

"If you really need our rifles, you will call?"

"Yes—yes; but let us hope that such emergency will not arise," and—no doubt unconsciously—Harry warmly pressed the little hand Minnie extended to him.

Gilmore hastily turned away toward the barricade, as the rifle of Double Fist again spitefully spoke. But his fears were dispelled as he saw the others quietly kneeling at their stations.

"What did you fire at, Mat?" asked Gilmore, as he glided to the guide's side.

"Jest puttin' a imp out o' his misery, yonder. Some o' you fellers must 'a' broke his back, by his squarmin' round so, and as I hate to see a varmint suffer, I dropped 'im," coolly returned Anderson.

For an hour or more the besieged lay quiet and undisturbed. Indeed, only for the still and ghastly dead lying out in the moonlight valley, one might have fancied it only a peaceful encampment, fast wrapt in slumber.

Yet this death-like silence without was very hard for Mat to bear, knowing, as he did, that it covered the subtle plotting of the Apaches, whose blow must soon fall with deadly force. It was hard to lie still and wait, not knowing from which quarter the blow was to fall.

Presently Anderson began to fidget, as though uneasy, though nothing escaped his lips. He peered keenly out from his loophole, then slowly shook his head.

"What is it, Anderson?" whispered Bryan, who was next to him.

"Look 'long the foot o' the hill—an' that is growin' wider an' wider every minnit. Go an' tell the gals to keep a good lookout at thar eend. Don't make no noise so's to wake up the old man."

The moon, that thus far had been the

besieged's friend, now threatened to endanger them. Rolling along its path, it had passed the point whence it flooded the entire valley with light. The jutting ledge of rock overcast a deep shadow at its own base, several feet in width, the more dense and impenetrable from the light just without. Protected by this gloom, the Apaches could crawl up to within a few yards of the barricade unseen.

Suddenly a loud *bang*—far different from the sharp, venomous crack of a rifle—rang out from the opposite side of the valley, where its flash momentarily lighted up a rocky pile. Simultaneously a jar was felt against the barricade, and the defenders felt that the bullet had been well-aimed.

"They've got a army-musket, I reckon," muttered Mat, with a sneer. "Sounds like it. But 'tain't a cannon to knock down these barracks. Let 'em burn tha'r powder, boys. Lay close, but keep your eyes skinned."

The next shot was aimed at the wagon, as the sound of a ball striking wood was plainly audible. Even Mat was puzzled to divine the purpose of the Apaches in these tactics, but redoubled his watchfulness, confident that this was but a mask to shield some more deadly blow.

The third shot was half-drowned by a horrible scream of agony. Then came a heavy fall and scuffle.

The young men glanced quickly around, in painful suspense. Minnie uttered a cry, as Temple aroused from his stupor, shouting hoarsely and incoherently, struggling to arise free from the clinging arms that held him down.

"It's only the mules, boys," hurriedly cried Anderson. "The varmints hev shot one or both of 'em. Harry, you'd best go and help the gals. It'll be the death o' the old man ef he don't take it more easy."

Gilmore glided to where the wounded man lay struggling, just in time to prevent his arising. Anderson turned to his loop, and keenly scrutinized the gradually widening belt of darkness. From this point he felt assured that the attack, if any, would be made.

The stricken mule was evidently dead, as its struggles and screams died away, but the survivor kept up a snorting and prancing that rendered the ears of the besieged of little service.

The events that followed, are such they can scarcely be described in detail upon paper. They were simultaneous—confused and baffling.

The valley seemed filled with ravening beasts, yelling, screeching and howling; then the quick rush of feet was heard. The dreaded moment was at hand.

The belt of darkness that stretched out before the guide seemed to spring into life, and scarcely giving him time to discharge his rifle, the Apaches were at the barricade. Dropping the empty weapons, Mat pealed forth his defiant war-cry, and then exhibited the powers that had gained for him his noted *sobriquet*.

While one hand rapidly emptied the chambers of a revolver, the other cut and slashed with the broad, heavy bowie-knife, here, there—wherever a foeman showed himself in trying to scale the barricade. Growling, snarling, gritting his teeth like a madman, the guide battled desperately, nobly seconded by his young comrades.

Suddenly he started and half-turned; not because wounded, though the blood streamed freely from more than one wound. A horrible fear assailed him, in common with the other whites.

A piercing shriek broke the air—the scream of a woman, coming from the further end of the fort. Then came a hoarse, maniacal screech—followed by a confused struggle.

"Help!—for God's sake help!"

These words came gaspingly from the lips of Harry Gilmore.

"Tend to this eend, boys," yelled Anderson, his voice rising high above the devilish tumult.

"Fight like devils or we're gone suckers!"

The warning was indeed needed, for, startled by the shriek and appeal for help, from their comrade, the defenders faltered and momentarily gave way. With fiendish yells of exultation the Apaches improved their opportunity, several fairly gaining the top of the barricade, when the young men returned to its defense with double fury.

As he shouted this warning, Mat darted to where the father and daughters had been left. And truly his aid was required.

In the dim light he beheld a confused, struggling mass, and saw that the upper figure was that of an Indian, with blood-stained knife up-

lifted. Uttering a snarling cry, Anderson clutched the savage by one shoulder, jerking him backward, at the same time burying the bowie-knife half its length in the red-skin's head, with a quick back stroke.

Freed from this foe, Gilmore quickly arose, leaving his first antagonist gasping in death upon the ground. He glared quickly around, as if confused, then cried:

"My God! she's gone—the devils have carried her off!" and would have leaped over the barricade had not the strong hand of the guide restrained him.

Another of the maniac-like screams came from without the wall; then suddenly died away. A glance showed Anderson that Temple was gone.

Breaking free, Gilmore leaped the wall and disappeared. With a curse, Double Fist followed, though it seemed like rushing upon certain death.

Scarcely had he touched the ground than he heard a heavy *thud*, and then staggered back against the barricade as a body was flung forcibly against his breast. The faint light revealed a white face, and from the garb, Mat knew that he held the form of young Gilmore.

Flinging the body into the fort, he rapidly followed, for a moment confused and bewildered. Without, he could hear the frightened plunging and snorts of the mule, mingled with a horrible crushing sound. Then he turned and crossed the inclosure with a single bound. He found it partially carried by the Apaches.

For several moments there was a horrible, indescribable *melee*. Then, like magic, it ended, save in one instance, where Sam Bryan was rolling over the ground tight-locked with a savage foeman.

A single, quavering yell came from the darkness without. It was the signal of retreat.

Had the one assault been as determined as at this end, the Apaches must have conquered. As it was, an instant after the signal, only the dead and the white occupied the fort.

Tearing himself free from Bryan's grasp, the Apache sprang to his feet, only to go down before Anderson's iron fist. Then the Hercules bounded into the air, alighting with a crushing force upon the savage's head and neck. One gasp—a convulsive shudder, and he was dead.

"Foller up, boys—they may come ag'in," cried Mat, setting the example.

"I—I'm played, boys," faintly muttered Paul Jayne, staggering back against the wall.

"Eh? you're jokin'—you ain't hurt bad?" cried Mat, supporting the sinking form.

"Yes—I tried to hold up till we whipped them—but—"

His head fell forward, a stream of hot blood poured over Anderson's hand. Paul Jayne was dead!

"He's fainted," faltered Mat, fearing to tell the truth at that moment, when the danger was so great. "Let him lay there for a bit. Keep a lookout here. I'll take t'other eend."

Double Fist glanced around the spot. Five bodies lay there, around and upon the mattress where John Temple had rested. Three of these were Apaches, one was Gilmore, the other—by her drapery, a woman!

Stooping, he raised her head; it was the eldest—Mary. She seemed dead. His trembling hand could detect no pulse, no heart beat. The wet and matted hair told him the cause. He shuddered, as he felt the clotted blood, and hastily wiped his fingers.

Fearing that the Apaches should again creep upon them, he sought his post, and strove to pierce the darkness, that soon filled half the valley. Then a faint groan startled him, and turning, he saw Gilmore sitting up, gazing around with a dazed look.

Suddenly the truth seemed to flash upon his mind, and he sprang erect, only to sink back again with a groan of despair. In his rude way, Mat strove to comfort the young man, but with small success.

"She's gone—gone, and I promised to protect her!" he would mutter, until Mat feared his brain was injured.

"Harry—take my flask," he at length uttered. "Mebbe the gal yonder ain't dead. You kin try to bring her to. I've got to keep guard here."

Gilmore obeyed like a child, but then as he felt Mary breathe faintly, he nerved himself, and worked diligently. In a few moments more she opened her eyes; then with a sigh, fell asleep, soothed by the strong liquor.

The gray light of dawn fell upon a sad and horrible scene.

The fort was one mass of blood and gore. A dozen dead Apaches lay around its walls.

Paul Jayne was dead. All the whites were wounded. Close beside the wagon, trampled and crushed to a shapeless mass, lay the body of John Temple, together with a brawny savage. It was the mule, also, that had stricken down Gilmore.

Leaping over the barricade, regardless of the risk he might be running, Mat, with one stroke, cut the brute's throat, then brought in the mangled father. Carefully he covered it with a blanket, lest the eyes of Mary should fall upon it.

And Minnie—the fair-haired? She was gone! Truly, it was a sad scene.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOMAN GUIDE.

THE same gray light fell upon Minnie Temple, a prisoner in the hands of the Apaches bound and helpless. Fearing the worst, she yet knew that the Apache attack had not entirely succeeded, since they were still in the valley, and acting as though upon guard.

It was while bending over the wounded man, that the attack came, and several savages had leaped the barricade, ere a weapon could be raised. Minnie saw Mary fall, with a faint groan, beneath a hatchet-stroke, and then a brawny Indian seized upon her, scrambling back over the rocks. John Temple seemed endowed with superhuman strength, as the shrieks of the girl met his ear. Minnie's last glimpse had been of his struggling furiously with several savages.

Tightly bound and gagged, she had lain in a rocky niche beyond view of the fort, through the remaining hours of the night, and now, in painful suspense, watched the motions of two Apaches who were standing near, conversing rapidly. From the deference shown him, the smaller of the two was a person of rank—probably the Apache chief; the other, a middle-aged warrior, whose left hand had been cut off.

Then the chief turned away, and the brave drew near to where Minnie lay. Stooping, he raised her, not unkindly, to her feet, first cutting the withes that bound them.

Minnie gazed earnestly into his face. The brave nodded, then, by signs, told her that she must follow him, tracing an intricate course through the hills with his finger-point. Though fearing she was to be taken to the Indian village or encampment, Minnie saw the folly of resisting, knowing that it could not better her situation.

As the brave motioned her to follow him, her hopes arose. If alone, might she not contrive to escape? Her hands once free, the task would be easy. The weight in her pocket told that the Apaches had not discovered her revolver.

But this hope soon vanished. The green cords were too firmly knotted to slip—too strong to be broken. Nor did the Apache seem inclined to loosen the bonds.

A long, wearisome three hours' toil through the broken, rocky foot-hills, brought Minnie and her captor to their journey's end; a small encampment, containing barely a score of lodges. Minnie quickly reasoned that the party had been changing their location, when, probably, the white tilted wagon, promising them plunder and scalps, attracted their attention. Such, in fact, was the case. Little Gray Bull commanded this band, his villages being many miles distant. As it was nearly the time to begin their annual hunt, he, together with the squaws and papposes of his braves, struck their lodges, and started in search of a more favorable location.

The Apache brave drove back the yelling squaws and dusky, naked little lumps, and led Minnie in to a lodge something larger than the rest. Here a wrinkled, hideous old woman crouched before the fire, smoking.

"Feather-foot," uttered the brave, in a tone of respect, "here is white squaw that the chief sends to your care. He says she is to enter his lodge, and become the mother of great warriors. He bade me tell you to keep her safe until he comes, but that those who wrong or injure her, had better paint their faces black."

Venomously the hag glared at Minnie, then arose, and hobbling forward with a clumsiness that sadly belied her name, clutched the maiden by the shoulders. Evidently the implied threat delivered by the brave, was not unheeded.

"Feather-foot hears, and will obey. But why did Gray Bull send, instead of coming himself?"

"The pale-faces fight well. The chief sends for more braves. One-Hand must go now. The trail is long before him."

The maimed warrior left the lodge. The hag

motioned Minnie to the opposite side, where was a small pallet of skins. Fatigued, she sunk down, her hands still bound behind her, while Feather-foot resumed her position before the fire.

The maiden's thoughts were gloomy and bitter enough. At that moment she believed that she was indeed alone in the world. Mary had fallen before her eyes; her father she felt was fatally wounded, if not also dead. Bowed down with sorrow she lay motionless upon the pallet for an hour or more.

Then the sound of voices aroused her, and raising her head, a faint cry of wonder broke from her lips. Feather-foot was speaking with a woman; and as the light from the hole above fell athwart it, Minnie saw that the new-comer was a white woman—though tanned, she could not mistake the face for that of a squaw.

At the same moment the woman turned toward Minnie. Her figure was lithe and graceful, about the average height of women. The face was that of one who had suffered and endured much, but the features were regular and clear-cut. In youth—for she could not have been less than thirty-five years of age, though the long black hair that hung past her waist, was unmarked by silver-threads—she must have been comely, if not beautiful.

A glow as if of pity fill her large dark eyes, and Minnie was on the point of speaking, when she, with an effort checked the words. The stranger made a slight but meaning gesture with one hand—the hand that was hidden by her dress from the eyes of Feather-foot. A vague hope sprung up in the maiden's heart at that gesture—she believed that in this strange woman she had found a friend. Then like a flash came the recollection of what Harry Gilmore had told her of the warning arrow—she felt that this woman was the one who had sent it.

The woman seemed a privileged character, though the old hag did not appear to regard her with much favor. In a few moments they ceased talking, and both crouched down beside the fire. Then the woman began a monotonous chant, rocking to and fro, Feather-foot closely eyeing her motions, though with an evident awe.

From a small pouch at her side, the white woman took a pinch of some powder, and flung it into the smoldering fire. A thin spire of blue flame ascended, casting out a strong and not unpleasant perfume. Then her voice rose and became clearer. Suddenly Minnie gave a start of surprise, her face flushing deeply. Though seemingly ignoring her presence, the strange woman was addressing her, in brief sentences mingled with the words of her chant.

"Be cautious—give no signs that you understand me. Appear downcast and dispirited. I am a friend—I will save you. To-night I will set you free—will guide you back to your friends. Do not fear—she understands no English. When I go, ask her for food. Eat and drink—you will require all your strength. She will be your only guard. I will drug her tobacco—with a powder that will make her sleep. Be brave, and all is well. Betray your hope, and you are lost."

Such were the words that Minnie extracted from the string of gibberish that flowed monotonously from the lips of the woman. Her start had attracted Feather-foot's attention, and lest her countenance should betray her, Minnie buried her face in the robes, though listening with a painful intentness.

Abruptly rising, the woman glided from the lodge. But it was not for some time that Minnie dared trust her composure, enough to follow her instructions. Then by motions she indicated her hunger and thirst. Grumbling disgustedly, Feather-foot yet ministered to her wants, and really feeling the need of nourishment, Minnie made a hearty meal on the corn-cakes and boiled meat. Then, weary and jaded, she lay down and sunk into a peaceful, dreamless slumber that lasted till after sunset.

When she awoke, with a start, the strange woman was again in the lodge, seated beside Feather-foot, both smoking. As though in her own lodge, the woman arose and brought a bark platter filled with meat and bread, placing it before Minnie, muttering as she stooped.

"Wait patiently—I will keep faith with you. In two hours more you will be free."

"God bless you!" softly breathed the maiden, bowing her head lest the keen eyes of the hag should read too much in the brightened face.

After what seemed twice two hours, Minnie saw her friend fill a pipe from the pouch at her side, and then pass the bag to Feather-foot. While the hag lighted hers, Minnie saw the

other slyly substitute another pipe for the one first filled.

Breathlessly she watched the result. Feather-foot smoked placidly, exhaling the fragrant vapor through her thin nostrils in twin streams. Her eyes were closed, and only for the smoke, one might easily have believed her asleep. But then the columns came less regularly. Her head slowly drooped. The pipe dropped from her lips, and she sunk forward, falling almost into the fire.

Dragging her back a ways, the woman arose and glided to the lodge door, gazing keenly around. Then turning, she sprang to Minnie's side, muttering:

"Come—the coast is clear. There is no time to lose, for I must be back here before day-dawn, or my life may pay the forfeit. Can you trust yourself? We must pass among the lodges, and though there are none but squaws and children here, they could easily stop us if aroused."

"You need not fear for me, I am used to danger. I will be cautious—never fear."

"Come, then. I must stop at my lodge, for a bundle of food. You will need it before I can see you again."

Together they left the tent, Minnie first shrouding her form in a larger blanket. The bundle was obtained, and then they glided noiselessly through the line of lodges. Ten minutes later they were hidden from view of the encampment by a point of rocks.

"You mistake—this is not the way I came," murmured Minnie, suddenly pausing.

"I know—your friends are still surrounded by enemies. You can not go there. I will put you in a place of hiding where you will be safe until their fate is decided. To try to rejoin them now, would be death to us both."

"I will do as you think best—surely you would not wish me wrong."

"No—or I would not be running the risk I am for your sake," simply replied the woman, hastening on down the valley.

For nearly two hours they pressed on, without pause or stoppage, through the valley, over hills and rocky plains, until Minnie's strength began to fail her. Still she uttered no complaint, and had not the guide caught sound of her heavy breathing, the maiden would have kept pace until she fell.

"Come—you need rest. I forgot that you were not as toughened as I. But sit down. There is plenty of time. Our journey is nearly ended," kindly said the woman.

"Ended—where is the end?" faltered Minnie.

"You must be contented with a cave, my child, until something better offers. At the worst, 'tis better than the lodge of Gray Bull."

"But you—you stay there—with the Indians."

"Yes—though not with *him*," and her voice rung with contempt and scorn. "He is a cowardly tyrant—a disgrace even to the savages, though they be more devils than human creatures."

"I don't understand—if you despise them so greatly, why not leave them? You seem free—and surely you are white."

"I am not free—I am bound to them and their life by a tie that I cannot break. It may not always be so—some time I will be free," gloomily muttered the woman.

"I am sorry for you, lady—" began Minnie, taking the other's hand in hers.

"Jessie—call me Jessie. It is my name—but I have not heard it for years. The sound from your lips will aid in banishing the black thoughts that throng my brain to-night. Time was when I heard—but there, I cannot talk of the past now. Something chokes me. Some time I may tell you my story—a sad, gloomy one it is. But not now—not now!"

Minnie made no reply, but sat quiet at Jessie's feet, still clasping her hand. The woman's face wore a hard, stony look as her dark eyes stared out in the darkness. It was the face of one who had suffered much and long.

"Come—time wastes," Jessie at length said, rising to her feet. "We must be going. You are rested?"

"Yes—but listen," whispered Minnie, tightening her grasp upon Jessie's hand.

"'Tis only the wolves howling, child. The brewing storm renders them uneasy. But never fear. We run no danger from them. 'Tis not late enough in the season for that. Follow me, now; carefully—the trail is rough and slippery."

The lugubrious howlings that had alarmed Minnie now grew plainer and more distinct, the chorus swelling in volume. Jessie unslung the bow that hung at her back, and tightened the

string. Minnie's hand stole into her pocket and clasped the little revolver.

"I hardly think they dare attack us, but fortunately we are near the cave I spoke of. Hasten—once in there and we can laugh at the wolves, unless—"

Abruptly she paused. A shrill, horrible cry rung out upon the night air—the shriek of a human being in agony, or in mortal terror.

"My God!" gasped Jessie. "I know that voice! William—I'm coming!" and then she sprang forward like a startled deer.

Mechanically Minnie Temple followed hard after.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NIGHT-CHASE.

A SAD, heart-sickening scene!

Mary Temple groaned bitterly as she raised her head from the blood-stained mattress, and glanced around the little fort in the light of a new day. She noted the two bodies lying side by side, covered with a blanket; the same glance showed her that Mat, Harry and Sam were still alive. She knew then that her father lay there—for both forms were too long for either to be her sister's.

Old Double Fist and Sam Bryan were busily engaged in digging in the hard soapstone. She knew that this was intended for a grave.

Her groan caught the guide's ear, and he, with a few words to Sam, crept toward her. Though no enemy was in sight, he knew that they were not far distant, and an exposure might be death.

"It's a black day, poor gal," muttered Anderson, as he pressed Mary's hand kindly. "We did all we knew how, but everythin' was ag'in' us. It's a awful blow for one so young as you, but b'ar up—ef not for your own sake, for ourn. We need all our grit now, to save what's left. You'll try an' b'ar up—be the true child o' your father—poor fellow!"

"Minnie—where is she?"

"Gone—not dead; I don't mean that. But she's a captive. We've sworn—the boys an' me—to git her back, ef so be any o' us lives to git out o' the scrape. An' we'll do it too."

"God grant it! But then you need not fear for me. I will not give way. Though but a girl, I'll do a man's duty while there's need for me," and Mary smiled wanly—a smile that sickened the old scout's heart to the core, so full of heart-broken woe was it.

Selecting her rifle from those standing against the barricade, Mary took her place, pale and stonily calm. She seemed scarcely to feel the wound upon her head that the guide had rudely bandaged while she slept.

The sun was an hour high when the shallow grave was completed, yet nothing had been seen of the Apaches. All but Anderson began to hope they had abandoned the siege as hopeless.

"Let me look upon his face once more," gasped Mary, as she saw the time was at hand when the dead must be covered from mortal view forever.

"My poor gal, it's better you didn't," muttered Anderson, interposing. "It'd ha'nt your dreams forever. Better think of him as you last see'd him; believe me, I speak for your own good. He was awfully hurt in the scrimmage."

Mary staggered back, but Dane's strong arm prevented her from falling. Then, with a painful effort, she recovered herself.

"Be it so, then. I know you would not deceive me. But it's hard—very hard! Even that poor consolation denied me!"

"You kin pray for him, gal—an' that'd be better. For pore Paul too. He fit like a man, he did, for you an' yours. He held up until we'd driv' em back, though he hed the death o' a dozen men in his karkidge. Pray for him, too," brokenly said Mat.

Tenderly, quietly, the two men were placed in their grave, side by side, still wrapped in their blankets. Then Mary knelt, and in a voice broken by sobs, prayed fervently for the eternal repose of their souls. Mat turned aside, his shaggy beard glistening in the bright sunlight, wet by the tears that dimmed his eyes.

Then, bowing her head, Mary gave way to her grief, as the cousins covered the bodies with the dirt and bits of slate. It was an hour that none of the little party forgot to their dying moment.

Slowly, heavily, the hours dragged by, until the sun passed its meridian. But few words were spoken by the besieged after Bryan's doubts as to the Apaches being in the vicinity were so significantly silenced by their brave guide. Stationed upon the opposite hillside

were two savages, evidently there for the purpose of making known to the main party any movement the besieged might make. And r-son's keen eye soon detected them, and it was his pointing them out that silenced Bryan.

"They must be thinking to starve us out then," muttered Dane, disgustedly.

"Either that, or they've sent for more help. Mebbe one, mebbe t'other."

"Honestly, Mat," added the young man, with a furtive glance toward Mary, as though fearful lest she should hear th words, "what show have we got? Can we escape from here?"

"Wal, I'll say the best I know how. Ef to-night's as cl'ar and bright as last night, then we're gone. But ef it's cloudy, as the looks bid fa'r to be now, an' the gal's got true grit, then thar's a chaine. Now you know jest's much as I do."

Bryan was forced to be content with this rather vague explanation, for Anderson, though never allowing his eyes to rest, seemed deep in reflectio. Gilmore felt confident that Mat was planning some scheme of escape, and was content to leave him alone.

Mid-afternoon a wild tumult arose in the valley; yells, shouts and cries of exultation. Mat's brow corrugated as the chorus broke forth. He easily read its signification.

"As I said, the imps hes got help," he quietly remarked, though his eyes glared deeply.

For the next hour his gaze was almost constantly directed skyward. Each cloud was slowly observed—its shape, color, course, and such apparent trifles. Then the grim, anxious look softened, and Anderson half-smiled.

"They're gatherin' together—I know'd it! Little shine the moon 'll give this blessed night, please the pigs!"

"Then you think—"

"Yes, I do—or would, ef I knew what you meant. But never mind. Thar's work for you to do now. Them imps won't give us much time a'ter dark comes, so we must be ready. Watch the valley cluss, now, an' be ready to take any varmint as tries to pick me off. Them on the hills don't matter—they're too fur for more 'n chaine shootin'," hurriedly uttered Anderson, drawing his knife.

Leaping lightly over the barricade, Mat darted swiftly to the wagon.

The keen-eyed savages on the hillside noted the action, and uttered a warning yell, at the same time dashing along the ridge, as if to cut off the fugitive.

Mat laughed loudly as they saw their mistake, and then set to work. First he removed the lariats that had been used to secure the mules, and tossed them into the fort. Then tearing loose one of the ashen bars that supported the wagon-cover, he severed a long strip of the canvas, and with these returned to his comrades, who were eagerly watching the movements of several savages who had been alarmed by the signal-shouts, but who kept well screened behind the rocks and boulders.

"Don't be afeard, boys," laughed the guide. "Thar's no danger o'them makin' a dash. They've other plans, an' last night was too rough for 'em to try it on in broad daylight. Harry kin watch, though, while you, Sam an' Mary make me a light string out o' this cloth. Cut it len'thways, so's to leave two or three threads together. Then tie them tight. Do the job neat. We don't want no foolin' when the time comes for work."

Seated beside his loophole, with now and then a glance out upon the valley, Mat began whittling, first a bow, then an arrow, rude and clumsy enough, but such as seemed to satisfy him. For this purpose he had got the wagon-bow.

Putting "this and that together," the young man began looking around, then upward, at the rock above them. Then, as they believed, they read Anderson's plan.

As stated, the ledge overhung the stone fort; still, from their position, they could see a thick, stunted cedar tree that seemed firmly growing out of the rock. Once at its foot, it would be easy to scramble up the hill. And this was just what Double Fist intended doing, when the storm-clouds should render all dark below.

By sunset, all was in readiness for the attempt. The bow was strung, the light string attached to the arrow. The lariats lay coiled and knotted to the twisted cord.

By shooting the arrow over the bent tree-trunk, the rope could be hauled up, and as it was long enough to double, the ends could be made fast below for the first ascent. Then Mary could be hauled up. After which the rest would be comparatively easy. It was not likely that the Apaches would consider it neces-

sary to guard that hillside since the overhanging ledge appeared impossible to scale.

Night fell, dark and dismal, though the storm still held off. The wind was high, howling fitfully down the valley and amid the rocky crags. Doubtless the Apaches hailed the night as one one most propitious; they could almost gain the barricade walls before being discovered, and then, with their reinforcements, one desperate rush would carry all before them.

Knowing there was no time to lose, Mat quickly set about his task. At the second trial, he succeeded. The next minute found him safe at the foot of the tree.

With the rope noosed beneath her armpits, Mary was hoisted up beside the guide, then directed to crawl out of the way. Ten minutes after the arrow flight, the barricade was deserted by all save the dead, and the fugitives, led by Old Double Fist, were stealthily gliding over the hillside, the ropes wound around his body, to leave no trace by which the Apaches might be guided in their pursuit.

Though betraying no hesitation, Double Fist was far from being at ease. He was in doubt which would be the best course to pursue—whether to strike directly out into the level plain, trusting to the rain that must come soon to obliterate their trail before day, or to seek a hiding-place among the hills, until the Apaches should have given up the quest as hopeless.

During his explorations while searching for the much-talked-of diamonds, he had stumbled upon a snug covert, but was now in doubt whether or no the Apaches might also know of it. If so, then that cave would be the first spot searched.

Thoughts of Mary and her weakness from her wounds, at length decided him upon trusting to the cave, feeling that she could never make the long march across the desert on foot. Easier in mind now that he had decided, Anderson hastened on toward the refuge.

The traveling was difficult, under the most propitious circumstances; doubly so now in the intense gloom, that was only relieved by occasional flashes of lightning. Thus, though half an hour had elapsed since their leaving the stone fort, a mile had not been traversed.

"Thar it is—I've been listenin' for it," muttered Mat, as the party involuntarily paused.

A single yell—loud and exultant, as though sent up by a score of throats in the flush of triumph, came clearly to their ears, borne by the favoring wind. Then, after a moment of deathlike stillness, there followed a series of yells and screeches almost diabolical, telling that the empty nest had been found—but not the fugitives.

"Come—we must travel, now; they'll be spreadin' all over these hills, lookin' for us. Ef we kin git to the hole first we may be all right."

Supporting Mary between them, the fugitives scrambled down the hillside as rapidly as they could in the gloom. Then across the narrow valley, and up the next ascent.

Scarcely had they begun this, than a bright flood of lightning lighted up the scene with dazzling brilliancy. Anderson uttered a fierce curse and flung himself heavily against his companions, almost prostrating them.

The solution of this strange action, was evident. A clear report rung out—from only a few feet before them a dazzling spout of flame lighted the air, and the vicious whistle of a ragged bullet cut the air close to their heads.

The lightning flood had shown Anderson the crouching figure of a savage, his rifle leveled toward them. Doubtless he had caught the sound of their approach, and prepared to receive them warmly, if enemies.

With an angry snarl, Anderson sprung forward, so suddenly that it seemed but a continuation of that which had saved one of his friends. He seemed guided by instinct, for his brawny hands closed upon the Apache's throat, and resistlessly bore him to the ground. Then a quick motion—a *thud*, and that foeman was disposed of.

Wiping the blade that was dripped with the Indian's heart-blood, Mat signaled his friends to approach. His words were almost drowned by the wild yells that arose from the valley below them.

The truth was plain. A portion of the Apaches in search of the fugitives had been guided by the shot, and were now close at hand. The brief flash that showed Anderson's dripping knife, also served to reveal their forms to the Indians.

"Quick! we must run for it!" cried Mat hastily. "The hole is only acrost the hill-top."

"Go—leave me," murmured Mary, sinking

back with a faint cry. "I sprained my ankle when I fell."

"We must fight, then," gritted Mat, as he sprung to her side and lifted her like a child in his arms. "Foller, boys—thar's some rocks here thar'll help us. Hurry!"

Scrambling up the hill, he reached the rocks, and then sprung into their middle. A cry broke from his lips as he felt himself falling!

By a strange coincidence, he had fallen into the same trap, as, some hours before, James Cook and Ed Dane had done. Like them, too, he had alighted safely, only now a carpet of ashes covered the dirt mound.

"What is it—are you hurt, Mat?" cried Gilmore, with wildly beating heart.

"No—thank God! Come down—it's our best chance. Jump—it's on'y a few feet."

The yelling savages were now at the hill's foot, and a moment's delay might be fatal. And the cousins, side by side, made the leap in the dark.

They two were uninjured, though rolling over and over in the still warm ashes.

The yells without suddenly ceased. All was still as death. Could it be that they knew of the cavern? This was the question whispered to each other.

"Most like they do," answered Anderson. "Else why was that red-skin thar? He wa'n't one of those after us; he hedn't time to git here so soon. An' it was on this hillside that the boys went under, near as I kin judge."

Mary uttered a faint cry. She had placed her outstretched hand upon the face of a dead or sleeping man!

Then came a faint, rustling sound at the hole above.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE MEETING.

HESITATING only for a moment, Minnie darted after Jessie, tight clinching the tiny revolver, which she was so soon to use in defense of her life. Horrible as were the yelping snarls of the ravening wolves, the idea of being left alone in that wild, dismal spot, with the storm fast gathering overhead, possessed still greater terrors to the maiden's mind.

A few moments sufficed to cross the intervening space, and as she sprung round an abrupt curve in the hill, a faint cry escaped Minnie's lips. Even through the gloom she could distinguish a frightful scene.

Here the hill seemed to end in a gentle slope that extended clear to the bank of the creek winding down the valley. The soil was entirely free from shrubbery and grass, save a fringe of bushes along the rocky ledge that divided the hill from the slope. Gravel and slate-stone, dry and crumbly, bleached by the sun and weather to an almost whiteness; such was the spot upon which was now raging a horrible, unequal struggle, between scores of wolves and a single man.

The man—whether white or red, in that dim light cast up by the slate, Minnie could not tell—was still upon his feet, battling desperately with either a clubbed rifle or a heavy stick. Around him raged the wolves, their eyes glittering brightly, their teeth clashing continuously, like the click of a steel-trap, now springing upon their victim from behind, then retreating from his frantic rush, frightened as much by his hoarse shouts as the crushing club. More than one brute lay helpless and crippled upon the ground, yelping and whining, swelling the diabolical chorus.

The man slipped—stumbled, and sunk to his knees. The wolves, with what seemed a cry of triumph, swarmed upon him. With a husky cry he arose, flinging the venomous animals here and there, tearing them from his person with his naked hands. For arms he had none now. Falling, the club was lost. It was hidden from his sight by the dusky mass of wolves.

All this Minnie took in at a glance, as she stood petrified with horror. Then she saw Jessie spring forward, almost to the outer line of brutes. To her strained hearing there came a sharp *twang*—instantly following, the shrill yell of a wolf as he rolled upon the shingle, literally spitted upon the feathered shaft.

And as the faithful weapon sent shaft after shaft into the writhing mass, the voice of the strange woman rung out clear and distinct, betraying no fear for self—only solicitude for the wearying man:

"Courage, William—courage! Struggle on—be brave—I am here to share your fate!"

And the lightning shafts sped upon their mission, the yelps of pain, of death came more rapidly. And the man, as if fired by her words, fought like a madman, striking the rushing curs with his feet, hurling them aside with his hands as they sprung at his throat.

By these efforts, truly wonderful coming from one so long struggling against deadly odds, the man freed his person entirely, and then with what seemed a glad cry of recognition, bounded through the writhing mass, reaching Jessie's side. However natural, this act bade fair to be the death of both. Now, instead of one, both man and woman were surrounded by the ravening monsters.

A cry of pain—involuntarily wrung from her lips—broke the spell that until now had held Minnie as if bound with a chain, and she sprung forward, her right hand outstretched. Crack—crack went the revolver, and though discharged almost without

aim, the leaden missiles could not avoid finding a victim.

The wolves, with low, sullen snarls, fell back, until they no longer formed a circle. Not the report alone, nor the death of their fellows caused this. It was the bright sparks of flame that awed them.

"Fall back to the rocks," cried Minnie, in a shrill tone, as her pistol spoke once more. "They can only attack us in front, then."

At their first step of retreat, the emboldened wolves sprung forward, their eyes glaring phosphorescently, their jaws clashing like castanets. Once more they hesitated, as the jet of flame darted toward them.

But what when the last load was fired? Already four of the seven chambers were empty. Minnie shuddered convulsively at the thought. It seemed death! And to die—it seemed horrible!

The feathered shafts flew less frequently than at first. Not that Jessie was seriously injured, though her person bore more than one trace of the keen fangs, but the quiver was nearly empty. Little wonder that her heart grew sick.

Once, twice, the wolves shrunk back; but in a moment were creeping closer than before. And now but one charge remained in the pistol—but two arrows in the quiver.

For a moment Minnie hesitated, and turned the smoking muzzle toward her own brow. It was a temptation—better death thus quick and painless, than to fall beneath those horrible fangs—to be torn into pieces, and devoured while yet alive—while the warm flesh was yet quivering with agony.

"Merciful God of Heavens! save us!"

The prayer broke from her lips unconsciously, rising clear and high above the din. It was then a huge, gaunt monster sprang forward, its paws resting upon her shoulders, its white fangs gleaming in her eyes, its hot, reeking breath steaming into her face.

A touch upon the trigger—a smothered report, and its hair scorched by the flash the monster fell in a writhing heap at the maiden's feet, shot through the heart.

And that was the last charge. Only the empty weapon remained; faithful so long, it was useless now. And the wolves crept nearer. It seemed as though nothing short of a miracle of Divine mercy could longer avert the horrible fate that stared the trio in their faces.

But this was not to be the end. Through all that desperate struggle for life, between human and brute, the eye of man had been upon the scene, eagerly watching the contest, though little else but a confused, shifting shadow could be seen.

In hiding themselves, with each passing moment expecting to be called upon to fight for their lives, they had believed this struggle to be between wolves and their enemies. But then they heard the voice of a woman, crying for help—and more, they knew by the words and accent, that this was a woman of their own race and color.

Hesitating no longer, they sprung forward, and took part in the drama. Swiftly spoke their fire-arms, before the despairing ones knew of their approach.

The wolves retreated; that storm of lead and fire they could not stomach. Only the dead and dying were left behind. Quick-witted, the new-comers read the truth—knew that in a moment more the survivors would return to the attack.

"Come—it's death to stay here," shouted one of the men, as he caught the fainting maiden in his arms, and bounded over the shingle to the rock-ledge.

"Help! he is dying!" gasped Jessie, as the man she had called William, sunk upon his knee, with a hollow, gasping groan. "Do not leave us here to die!"

"I won't—help me—the wolves are coming back!" cried the second man, as with the strength of manly youth, he half lifted the reclining figure from the ground. "Take his arm—if he falls now, he's lost!" he added, and the two between them dragged the man up the slope.

The wolves were gliding near, and might have caught them, only that he who had already carried Minnie to safety, suddenly reappeared, bearing in his hand a blazing brand. As this was flung into their midst, the demons fled, yelping and howling in terror.

"There—they'll scarcely trouble us again—at least not immediately. Now, if you please—my arm is stronger than yours. You can follow after us," kindly uttered the man, relieving Jessie from the wounded man's weight.

"You are very kind—"

"Not at all. If I am not mistaken, you are the lady who warned us of our danger. You know one good turn deserves another."

The quartette pushed through the belt of bushes, and for a few yards, passed along beneath a ledge, that projected above the crumbling slate-stone. Then stooping, they entered a small cavity, where all was dark and dismal.

"Keep close to me, madam. A few steps further, and our journey is done."

"I know it," quietly replied Jessie. "This is not my first visit here."

The two men appeared surprised, but said nothing. Shortly a faint glow became visible, and then a small fire was seen, dimly lighting up a spacious chamber, the outlines of which could only be imperfectly seen.

Beside the fire crouched Minnie, pale, but conscious. Gently laying the injured man upon the dry sand, the elder of the two men proceeded to examine his hurts, with a grave, serious expression, that bade Jessie expect the worst. Tremblingly she watched his face, watched and waited, her heart sick and fainting.

She now recognized the men. They were of the party she had warned of danger from the Apaches. These two were those she had met and warned a second time; the ones with whom she had conversed briefly, scarce thirty-six hours before.

They were, indeed, James Cook, the Californian, and Ed Dane, of whom we have lost sight for some time.

It will be remembered that Dane swooned, overcome by the stifling smoke, while groping their way through the tunnel-like passage. A few yards further, Cook came upon what seemed the termination of the passage, in a heap of earth. Then he, too, gave way, and fell into the pool of water, that instantly extinguished his torch.

Fortunately the water was not deep enough to drown him, though he fell face downward, and the cool liquid tended to revive his sinking senses. Slightly raising his head, a current of cool, fresh air passed his lips—or was it fancy? No! it was truth.

Even in such a moment, he reasoned clearly and logically. If there was a constant draft, then there must be an opening to the outer air. If the air could find a passage, might not he, as well?

He breathed more and more free. Hope was reviving him, nearly as much as the fresh air. He listened for his comrade—he fancied he heard a faint groan, at no great distance. He called aloud; but only the moaning gasp replied. Holding an arm over his mouth, he staggered to his feet. The flannel shirt was saturated, and to his great joy, Cook found that he could breathe through it with comparative ease.

He staggered on until he fell over the senseless body of his young comrade. Exerting all his strength, the Californian dragged Dane to the water, and bathed his face. Ten minutes later the young man had recovered his consciousness.

Then Cook whispered his hope—and that too reinvigorated Dane. Together they examined the end of the passage before them; by the sense of touch. All their torchwood was out.

The dirt felt loose—as if it had lately been placed there. And then, standing upon Cook's bent back, Dane found that the surmise was true—that a portion of the roof had caved in, thus blocking up the passage.

Only for a very brief time could they stand erect; the smoke was dense, hot and suffocating. But the water proved an invaluable ally. Through its aid they were enabled to live, to breathe, to work.

It was a long task, for the cave had been considerable, but at length they bored a hole through to the passage beyond, large enough to admit their persons. Then thoroughly soaking their clothing, they boldly ventured on through the darkness.

The draft seemed to increase as they progressed, and the air to be less laden with smoke. Or that may have been fancy, now their hopes were rising. Still it was a bitter struggle, and they nearly sunk beneath it. Yet, as we know, they succeeded in reaching safety.

Jaded, completely exhausted, they dared not venture entirely away from the cave, knowing that such bitter enemies were near, and sheltered amid the fringe of burses, they lay down and slept long and peacefully.

It was day when they awoke. Nearly the first object that met their gaze as they peered forth upon the slope, was a party of Apaches filing by. That told them the folly of venturing forth, and fearing the worst had befallen their friends, they returned to the cave and sought out a snug place of concealment. This they found—and more besides. But of that anon.

Through that day they suffered hunger and thirst rather than run any risks. Expecting a search for their bodies would follow as soon as the rocks cooled after the fire, they had not dared even indulge in a pipe, but the day passed by without their hearing or seeing anything more of the Apaches. The reader, doubtless, knows why this search was not made. The Apaches had their hands full of other work.

The Californian looked grave as he arose from examining the wounded man. Jessie shuddered as she read his face.

"There is no—no hope?"

"I'm sorry to say it, but a lie would do no good now," sadly replied Cook, for something in this woman stirred his heart strangely. "You may bid him good-by; an hour hence may be too late."

The injured man stirred—slowly raising his head, supporting his weight upon one hand. As he gazed wonderingly around, a brand broke in two and a bright flame momentarily flashed up, clearly outlining the party.

Minnie shrunk back in horror. In this man she fancied she beheld the murderer of her father. The long, matted hair and beard—the shaggy dress of skins, now torn and tattered by the wolf-jaws, all corresponded to the picture drawn by John Temple.

"Jessie—where are we—what does this mean?" muttered the man, in a wondering tone, as the woman knelt beside him.

"Thank God! you know me—you remember, William?"

"Yes—why shouldn't I? I remember all—how those devils in human shape tried to force you from me—how we fled—Ha! they have followed us! They come to steal my wife—but they must fight!" cried William, his eyes glowing madly, as he sought to rise.

The shadowy forms of the two diamond-seekers excited him thus. He seemed to fancy them enemies.

The Californian seemed strangely agitated. He shrunk back from the light, pale, trembling in every fiber. He appeared like one haunted by the past—by some deep grief or fearful crime.

The excitement hastened what must, at best, have come soon. The wounded man sunk back—one slight shiver, and his spirit fled.

For a moment Jessie bowed over his lifeless form, as if crushed to the ground. Yet his death could not have been such a dreadful blow. For years this man had been mad—a heavy weight upon her mind. He was better off now. Still, though she had learned to look forward to this event as the only mode of escape from a life that was loathsome, the woman could not forget that this man had been her husband.

"Jessie—Jessie Baughman!" muttered the tall Californian, as though the words were forced from his lips by an inevitable power.

"Who calls me?" and the woman started to her feet, glancing around with a wondering air, as though half-expecting to behold a vision from the other world.

"James Cook. Jessie, my lost darling, have you indeed forgotten me, as they said you had?" and the next moment his strong arms clasped her to his heaving breast.

"Merciful Heaven!—alive?" gasped Jessie; but then she started back from the hot lips that rained kisses upon her.

"No, James—I must not—cannot forget that my husband lies there," and she pointed down at the corpse beside them.

With a strong effort, Cook controlled his feelings, and then the clouds and misunderstandings that had shrouded the past were gradually swept away. It was a sad, long story of wrong and suffering, but which I will briefly condense.

Leaving his betrothed, Jessie Baughman, Cook journeyed to California, hoping there to gain the fortune that seemed denied him at home. At Frisco he met Fred Holland, and mutually pleased, they became partners. Their mining prospered. They were rapidly growing rich, and in his joy at the thought of what happiness awaited him, Cook made a confidant of Holland, telling him all, showing him Jessie's picture. A month later, the upper diggings on the Feather river was the scene of a tragedy. Cook was found, one morning, apparently dead. Holland was missing; so also was the gold that belonged to them jointly. Cook recovered from his hurts, after a lingering struggle with death, but the would-be murderer escaped. Robbed even of his papers—even of his Jessie's miniature, Cook once more fought with the stubborn earth, to win back the fortune he had lost. And finally he succeeded; but during all these weary months, he had heard nothing from home. Sick at heart, he finally set sail from Frisco. He reached home in safety; but what a blow awaited him. Jessie was married—to the man who had brought her tidings of Cook's death, together with her letters and picture. For nearly a year she had resisted him, but then yielded, more for her father's sake than her own. A month later, her father died, and she set sail for England. This was before Cook's return. Vowing vengeance upon the traitor, he followed them; they passed in mid-ocean. Holland—or William Harvey as he now called himself—had become a convert to Mormonism. The scales soon fell from his eyes, and to save Jessie, whom he fairly idolized, they fled from the City of Sin. The Danites followed—the fight was one of horrible privation and suffering, but the Avenging Angels were baffled, though the fugitives were captured by Apaches, and in the struggle, a blow upon the head deprived Harvey of reason. Their lives were spared, from some whim, and by her knowledge of medicine, Jessie gained no little influence over the Apaches. Harvey's brain contained only one idea; every white man seemed to him one of the Danites, and he sought to slay them. Under this idea he had killed John Temple.

"Hush!" suddenly interposed Dane. "Somebody is approaching. I hear footsteps!"

Cook instantly extinguished the fire, then grasped his weapons.

And the sound of footsteps came nearer, and nearer.

CHAPTER X.

A JOYOUS REUNION.

THE men prepared their weapons and peered keenly upward. The position of the entrance could only be distinguished faintly from its being a trifle less opaque than the surrounding rocks. And sharp-eyed Mat felt confident that he could make out several of the Apaches cautiously climbing into the hole.

Quick as thought his rifle spoke, discharged almost without an attempt at aim, since, in the gloom below, the barrel itself could not be seen. And yet a shrill yell followed—a heavy body fell at the guide's feet, only to be pounced upon by that worthy, whose long fingers closed around the Indian's throat with a grasp that speedily stilled all quivering.

Gilmore and Bryan had fired immediately after Anderson did, but with no apparent effect other than to cover the retreat of the venturesome warriors, who now left the entrance free. Mat cast the dead savage aside, and then satisfied himself as to what had wrung the scream from Mary's lips.

It was the body of an Apache—one of those slain by the Californian and Dane. A groping search discovered others, scarred and disfigured as though by fire, but nothing that gave a clue to the fate of his friends.

These facts set Anderson busy thinking. Where were the two—Cook and Ed? Dead? If so, why was the Apache standing guard over the cave entrance? Could it be that they had escaped by means of the passage leading back toward the center of the hill whose mouth he had explored while groping around? It might be possible—barely so, Mat felt.

"What are they about to do?" at length muttered Harry, touching Double Fist. "What is that noise?"

"Sounds like pilin' brush—an' the hole up thar looks blacker, don't it? Mebbe they're goin' to try smoke," slowly replied Anderson; and only for the darkness there would have been seen an uneasy look upon his face.

"But *can* they?"

"When you was a shaver, didn't you ever smoke out a rabbit? They'll find this a easier job. Ef they r'ally mean it, we must try the long hole back thar. Mebbe it leads somewhar—anyhow, the eend 'll be longer comin'."

"Why not make a start at once?—think of Mary," urged Sam.

"Don't be foolish, boy. S'posin' we'd do that, an' then the imps 'd try ag'in to git in here. Whar'd we be then? No, ef the hole leads cl'ar to t'other side o' the hill, this fire 'll give us time enough to git thar, afore the rocks cool so's them imps kin git down. See?" returned Mat following nearly the same reasoning as had Cook before him.

They had not long to wait for this question to be decided. The Apaches lost no time in the manner described in a previous chapter. Profiting by their experiences then, they heaped the combustibles above the hole.

Anderson only waited to be reasonably sure of their purpose, before setting forth. As if in desperation he discharged his rifle through the brush-heap, then turned and led the way into the tunnel, while shrill, exultant yells rung out from above. The Apaches seemed confident of their prey.

It is not my intention to dwell upon the hopes and fears of the little party as they groped their way through the dismal darkness, nor to describe their increasing anxiety and sufferings as the atmosphere became heavy with bitter, acrid smoke. I have already attempted to describe one such journey of horror—of living death; and that must suffice.

They followed the exact course taken by Cook and Dane, though, of course, ignorant of that fact. Discovering the passage that turned to the left as he groped along the wall, Anderson was struck by the same thought—by the recollection of how the hill was shaped, and believed that this was the nearest way to safety.

They passed the spot that was so nearly fatal to the first two, crawling through the hole excavated by them. And then on, their throats parched, their eyes almost sightless.

It was the sound of their footsteps that startled the Californian and his companions. And as he stood there with Ed Dane, before the crouching woman, their weapons ready for instant use, Cook started convulsively.

Faint and indistinct came the words:

"I can go no further—this is killing me!"

"Help her what ye kin, boys," a deeper voice replied. "It feels like we was nigh the eend. The air's fresher."

"Heavens! can it—you heard, Ed?" gasped Cook, disbelieving his own ears.

"It's Mat—I'm sure," eagerly muttered Dane.

"I'll call him—"

"No—we must be sure. I'll give the signal—he can not mistake that, while he might your voice," and then a shrill, peculiar whistle rung out with startling distinctness.

For a moment after the shrill echoes had died away, there was silence so intense that those waiting could almost hear the throbbings of their hearts. Then, broken and irregular, as though in doubt, came the answer. Cook could no longer doubt, and a cry of joy broke from his lips.

"Is it you, Mat?" he cried, springing forward a pace.

"Who be *you*?" came a doubting voice.

"Why—don't you know? Jim Cook—and Ed is here, too."

"You're shore? I thought you was rubbed out!" and the old guide seemed sorely puzzled.

"Feel that—does it feel like the grip of a dead man, old fellow?" and laughing, Cook grasped Mat's hand warmly.

The reader must try and imagine the meeting between the friends—more especially that between Mary and Minnie Temple. Pen is powerless to describe it.

It was like the dead come to life again. Mat had felt confident that Cook and Dane were killed by the Apaches. Minnie had told how she had left the others. Neither expected to meet again in life.

Yet the meeting was not entirely joyous. Though dreading it, Minnie now for the first learned that her father was indeed dead—that he had died in the vain endeavor to protect her.

The sisters were seated apart, mingling their tears. Jessie was near them, but listening to the comrades consulting together as to their wisest course.

"Now that we are all together—except poor dead Paul—there is nothing more to wait for," observed Cook, thoughtfully. "And the ladies—we have them to think of, too."

"What kin we do? The Apash won't be long in follerin' in after us, ef only to raise our skulls. It's like they'll track us by torchlight. Ef we left here, they'd soon smell us out, an' the gals is poor hands walkin' ag'in a red-skin. We kin make a better fight in here than out thar in the open."

"You forget—we have six mules. Ed and I caught and tied them in the valley above. I'm sure they're there still."

"No," interposed Jessie, "they are gone. That same afternoon that I met you, the Apaches discovered them. They are now at the encampment."

"Then we are indeed lost!"

"Perhaps not—if you will trust in me. There are

places here where you can baffle search for hours, and possibly escape entirely being found. I will go to the Indian village and fetch horses—I can manage it with little risk, since they all believe me a true friend. With them, you can bid defiance to the Apaches."

"Kin you do this, r'ally?"

"Yes—I can."

"The risk will be too great—it is not right that you should brave all the danger, while we, strong men, hide from it," warmly cried Cook.

"It would be a risk for any of you—but not so for me. The Apaches look upon me as sacred—their Great Medicine," smiled Jessie. "But words are a waste of time; come, I will show you a hiding-place."

"I know them all," added the Californian. "Ed and I explored every inch of this place. And we made a discovery, too."

"What kind?"

"A gold-mine!"

"Plenty good, in its way, but not o' much use to us now," muttered Double Fist, yet with a thrill of pleasure that was but natural.

"Go at once, then. Time is precious. I will hasten to the village, and by or before daylight, you may expect me here with horses."

"Show them, Ed. I will see this lady safe outside," quietly added Cook.

Jessie cast a quick glance in the direction of his voice. She read a deeper meaning in his tone than did the others. But she gave no word of dissent, as Cook gently took her hand, and groped his way to the cave entrance.

Side by side they peered forth from the belt of shrubbery. Though the leaden clouds still rolled swiftly along, they were more broken, and an occasional star gleamed forth. The storm had swept past. No rain was to fall that night.

The dead wolves could faintly be distinguished, lying upon the white shingle. But nothing could be seen or heard of living enemies. Suddenly Jessie turned and extended her hand, saying in a low tone:

"Time is passing—I must go. Good-by—God knows whether it may not be forever! Tell me, then, before we part, that you—you forgive me—"

"Forgive you! There is nothing to forgive. You believed me dead—how could you think otherwise? The smooth tongue that blinded me might easily deceive you. But we will not part just yet. I am going away with you."

"It would be wise not. You are needed more here."

"Jessie—do you think I will leave you now? No—no. I have lost fifteen years of life by black treachery—for that length of time you have been dead to me. Where you go, I go. We will live or die together."

"Come, then," and they glided out from their covert.

For an hour or more they hastened through the night with as great speed as they could put forth, for time was indeed precious—how precious even they did not know. Then Jessie paused, with a little cry, her arm outstretched to the left.

They were now standing upon the crest of a considerable hill, and only for the night, would have had an extensive view of the surrounding country. As it was, an object, apparently miles away, had caught Jessie's eye; the bright twinkling of a camp-fire.

"The Apaches!" muttered the Californian, mechanically.

"No—they would not burn a fire this late, in such an open and exposed spot. It is the camp-fire of some one ignorant of the danger he runs—of white men, doubtless."

"Ha! can it be the friends they—the Temples—became separated from? It must be—who else would be here?" and Cook reflected for a moment. "If I were only *certain*, I would return to our friends. Could we once join that party, we would be safe, for they outnumber the Apaches."

"The tramp at night would kill the girls. Still, this is a chance that you ought not to neglect. You must go and see who they are."

"With you?"

"No—two chances are better than one. I will keep on and secure the horses. Then if you fail, we will be no worse off than at first. Go now, and be cautious—for my sake!"

The last words were spoken in a low, faltering voice, but the Californian heard them. Before he could speak, Jessie was springing away, and the next moment the shadows swallowed her up. And after a brief doubt, Cook turned and hastened away toward the distant camp-fire.

The distance was greater than Cook had imagined, and the intricate course he was forced to pursue, made it still further, so that it was over an hour before he reached the vicinity. He knew now that it was the encampment of white men; from the canvas-covered wagons that stood near the fire, but only one human figure met his gaze. That was a man seated close beside the fire, his head bowed forward, seemingly sound asleep. A rifle lay across his lap. Evidently he was the sentinel—and an inexperienced one; the most dangerous to approach, because so easily flustered.

Knowing this, Cook sought shelter in a slight hollow, and then shouted to the sentinel. That worthy sprang to his feet with a cry of alarm, but still stood in the glow of the fire. His cry aroused the camp, and then came a confused bustle and the rattle of weapons, as the white-tilted wagons gave forth their live freight.

"I'm a friend—a white man like yourselves. I come in search of help," clearly called out the Californian.

"Come forward and tell your story," uttered a stern voice.

"All right. If I mistake not, you've heard of John Temple—"

"Where is he—what do you know of him?" eagerly.

"He's dead, but his two daughters are in danger from the Apaches. I came to you for help. Will you go?"

"We will—but look to yourself if this is a trick. You will not live long to boast over it," cried the leader.

"How would I know their name? The girls are called Mary and Minnie. They became separated from you, by their wagon's breaking down. You left Colorado in quest of diamonds."

"Right! I know you now. We will go. Hurry, boys. We owe it to the girls, for our carelessness in losing them," and eager for a brush with the Indians, the party, in ten minutes more, were hastening to the rescue.

As may be imagined, James Cook headed an eager band, and scant time was wasted along the trail, for the diamond-seekers had bitterly reproached themselves for having lost sight of John Temple and his children in their mad race for the fabulous wealth they imagined only awaited their stooping to pick it up. Thus it was almost a race to see who should be the first one to reach the rendezvous.

They had a willing leader in the Californian, and so perseveringly did he press on, that, just as the first grayish light of dawn painted the east, the foot of the shingle slope was reached. Here he paused for a moment.

"It may be, boys, that we're in time—then again it's barely possible that we may find the Apaches there before us. Of course, then, we must fight, and if too late to save, avenge our friends. But in the dark, friends and foes are much the same; so, while some enter, others must start a fire so that it can be carried inside."

"I kin hear shootin'—quick time, too!" muttered one of the party, excitedly.

"Come on, boys! We must take a hand in!" yelled Cook, darting up the slope, his blood on fire.

No more thought was given to a fire. Every man dashed hastily after their leader, with weapons drawn, eager to participate in the bloody drama they felt assured was even then being enacted within the cave, for as they neared the entrance, the muffled reports came to their ears more distinctly.

Then the firing ceased, and Cook involuntarily paused. In that moment he believed all was over. But then came a sullen, though faint, murmuring. He knew then that the struggle was hard to hand.

He did not need to urge his comrades on now. The same sound guided them, growing louder and more distinct as they neared the spot.

Entering the hole, Cook glided forward with the ease of one thoroughly familiar with the ground, while the others hesitated, finally huddling together in doubt. This was but natural. Only a madman will rush blindly on through the dark, not knowing what is before him.

Cook momentarily paused to locate the place of combat. A moment sufficed for this. And in that moment he distinguished the wild battle-cry of Old Double Fist, mingled with the curses, shouts and yells; the clash of steel—all the *mania* of a deadly hand-to-hand conflict, rendered but the more horrible from its taking place in the darkness—where not even the flash of steel could be seen, when the blow might be felt, not guarded against.

"Give it to 'em, Mat," yelled Cook, as he sprang forward. "Here I am with help—clear the varmints out, boys!"

From behind him came the sturdy voices of the diamond-seekers, and a number of them, guided by his voice, darted forward through the gloom. The Apaches also heard the shouts—and though they did not recognize Cook's voice, they knew that all was lost. Already discouraged and sadly decimated, it needed but this to put them to flight.

With yells of dismay, they turned and fled. Cook was struck and knocked down, being trampled over by the panic-stricken savages. And then came a more serious collision with the whites, who had followed Cook.

Warned by the yells, the men were prepared for the shock, and struck out viciously. At that moment a report came from the large chamber, and a bright flame suddenly shot up, casting a flood of light around, plainly revealing the struggling mass of humanity.

The diamond-seekers, by the aid of loose powder, had set fire to a heap of small brushwood, hastily collected. And now the wretched Apaches were taken between two fires—for Mat and his comrades came rushing forward, their weapons dripping blood, their features distorted with deadly rage and hatred.

The conflict—if such it might be called, when the Apaches only sought to burst through their enemies' lines, in order to flee—was brief. Several of the savages succeeded in gaining the outer air, and fled up the valley, fear lending wings to their feet.

"You wasn't none too soon, Cook," cried Mat, as he brushed the perspiration from his brow. "They was gettin' the better o' us in thar."

"How did it happen?"

"It came about in this wise. After you an' Jessie left the cave, Ed took me on an explorin' expedition, when about the fust thing we saw was a naked red-skin carryin' a torch, while behind him, like shadows, came his comrades. I sent Ed back to tell the boys to prepare for a scrimmage, an' to put the gals out o' harm's way. He was not gone long, an' got back jist as the red skunks war collected round the dead body o' Harvey, jabberin' like all possessed. Here war a good chance to make the score

less, an' drawin' a couple o' pistols each, we emptied four barrels into the crowd. I war particular to draw a bead on the feller with the torch, an' as he went down the light war extinguished by his lifeless carcass. Covered by the darkness, an' the yells of the livin', an' the groans of the dyin' red-skins, we made our way back to whar we left our friends, whar we made up our minds to fight it out, an' if needs be sell our lives dearly. We war bein' hard-pressed, an' could not stand up much longer, when you arrived, jist in the nick o' time."

"Jessie—has she returned?"

"Didn't she come 'th you?"

"No. Boys, half a dozen of you, follow me. If those devils meet her, she is lost!" and half crazed with fear and apprehension, the Californian darted from the cave, followed by half the diamond-seekers.

"Whar's Ed?" suddenly demanded Anderson, as he glanced round the party by the fire-light.

Fearing the worst, Mat grasped a blazing fagot, and hastened back to the niche. There he found his young friend, dead—he had fallen at the last moment, in a grapple with a huge Apache. A knife was buried in the bosom of each; still clasped by the hands that had driven the blades home.

This was the only serious catastrophe. Though more or less wounded, Mat, Harry, and Sam were but little the worse for their desperate struggle.

Mary and Minnie also were safe. The niche had shielded them from all harm.

And an hour later, when Cook returned with Jessie, who had fully succeeded in the attempt to secure horses, only the death of poor Dane clouded their joy.

The events of the succeeding days must, perforce, be passed over with few words, though I would fain linger longer with our friends. But time and space forbid; a brief *resumé* must suffice.

After due deliberation, the diamond-seekers—including our more particular friends—decided to make the cavern their head-quarters, though there was some danger that must be risked. It was possible that the Apaches who had escaped the cave-struggle, yearning for vengeance, might lead a strong body of their brethren hither for that purpose. But the reward was deemed sufficient to offset this danger.

The discovery of gold was made known to all; and then, by the aid of torches, the niche was closely examined. *The walls fairly glistened with the precious metal!* The passage, as far as dug, followed a vein of earth V shaped, where the gold had gradually sifted to the bottom.

Considering that nothing had as yet been discovered, to confirm the report of diamonds and precious stones, abounding in numberless quantities among the mountain ravines, it is little wonder that the adventurers unanimously voted to turn their energies wholly to gold-digging. And truly they were wise in so doing.

Not only in the cave did they find the precious dust, but Jessie showed Cook another place, that she had discovered nearly a year previously. Here the gold was even more plentiful—though in a smaller area—than within the cave.

It was called "the cave," because such was the name generally given it by the adventurers, but it was, in fact, a mammoth gold mine, nearly worked out. What hands—what race of people had wrought this gigantic "honey-comb," probably will never be known, any more than with other mines, ruined cities, etc., which have been discovered in the far Southwest of late years.

Doubtless the reader suspects all that we can tell them regarding Mary and Minnie. Still, it is pleasant to confirm their ideas.

Gilmore was already in love—had been from that night when he fought so desperately in defense of fair-haired Minnie. Sam had conceived an idea that he could easily become very fond of black-eyed Mary.

Well, the cousins were handsome, brave and intelligent. The sisters were young and grateful. What more easy or natural than for them to fall in love? Nothing—and they *did* fall in love—each with their opposite in complexion. And when winter fell, the sisters and cousins were united at Denver.

Of Jessie? After fifteen years of unbroken sorrow, the parted were united. The past was buried—for he who had so treacherously deceived them both, was dead and in the grave.

Mat Anderson—the terrible Double Fist—though rich, is a contented overseer in the joint-stock ranch of the cousins, Gilmore & Bryan. The other "diamond-seekers" are scattered far and wide.

Gilmore still declares his belief that jewels may be found in the "fields," and instances his own fortune. If not a "diamond," he found a "pearl above price," in his Minnie. And Sam and James Cook fervently say *amen!*

THE END.

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